

NEBULA

MONTHLY

2/-

SCIENCE FICTION

NUMBER 39



FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

THE BARRED SPIRAL ENIGMA



Barred Spiral Nebula in Pegasus

KENNETH JOHNS

Our photograph this month of a barred spiral galaxy, NGC 7741 in the constellation of Pegasus, shows another of the mysterious objects that blaze with enigmatic fire in the deeps of intergalactic space. Looking down on the disc of the galaxy, the 200 inch Hale telescope brings out finely the central straight bar and the two trailing spiral arms, both thick with hot blue stars newly born from the interstellar hydrogen of these confused regions.

This interstellar space is not *our* interstellar space; we must cross a true "outer space" to reach this galaxy, and the minute voyage to the Moon, so ludicrously dubbed "outer space", dwindles to insignificance in face of the journeys man will one day venture upon—journeys for which the routes are already charted.

Galaxies come in many shapes and sizes, from featureless globes and ellipses to the swirling beauty of randomly moving star clouds of the irregular galaxies. Each one contains anywhere between 100 million and 100,000 million stars, and there are 100 million such galaxies within range of the 200 inch telescope.

Hubble classified galaxies according to their shapes. Beginning with structureless globular galaxies, his classification went through the more and more elliptical examples and then split into two paths, one showing normal spirals as their arms became further and further unwound. The other path traced out the barred spirals as their arms unwound from the nucleus.

This sequence, beginning with a sphere of stars rotating and throwing out spiral arms which in time become dissipated in space leaving only an irregular cloud of gas, was taken by some astronomers to be the actual sequence in the life of galaxies.

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Edited by PETER HAMILTON

Number Thirty-Nine

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Look Here . . .

1958 was a good year for science fiction. This statement may come as something of a surprise to you after the grim forebodings in newspaper articles, and sometimes indeed in the Editorials of science fiction magazines, that "space fiction" was outdated and would decidedly be out of the running before very long.

Well, a great deal of propellant has flowed through the rocket venturii since this melancholy outlook was in vogue, and it would seem that a little practical scientific achievement has shaken many of the doubting Thomases out of their former state of mind, and restored the sense of wonder of those who make their livelihood from the genre and who, incidentally, should have known better than to doubt its ultimate correctness at all.

In retrospect it is quite amusing to examine one or two of the "pronouncements" on scientific progress made prior to the advances of the last few months. Pronouncements, which if I am not very much mistaken, will prove even funnier as time goes on.

Before getting down to more important matters, I must deal briefly with the attitude of the "old guard" of British astronomers, and in particular with that of our much quoted Astronomer Royal. At every opportunity these gentlemen have attempted to refute the possibility of space travel and the existence of alien life forms. Indeed, so passionate has been their refusal to permit even a modicum of progress or freedom of thought in their own special field, that their outlook, backed as it is by the hallmark of "knowledge" and officialdom, seems dangerously similar to that of those other professors in a bygone age who announced with all the ponderous logic of complete ignorance that man was never "meant" to fly.

Many of the science fiction personalities to whom we have turned hopefully for solace, appear to have been but little more enlightened in their outlook. In one newspaper article which was particularly brought to my attention, a group of experts, interviewed in suitably demoralising surroundings, appeared literally to fall over one another in their eagerness to disclaim the legitimacy of the term "science fiction" when applied to their own personal efforts. This kind of thing may be all very amusing for the average reader of the Sunday newspaper in which it appeared, but can hardly be said to do our form of literature (call it what you may) very much good.

The atmosphere of defeatism which has been so very apparent in the writings of some of our most prominent science fiction editors and columnists has also had an extremely depressing effect on the enthusiasm and fan-spirit which so many readers feel towards this type of writing. Not, let it be said, that this kind of pessimism has always been occasioned by a marked failure on the part of the writer involved to maintain his position in the science fiction world. Quite often it seems merely to have been due to the purely negative effect of his disappointment at the absence of any marked improvement in the popularity of his publication!

It is my experience that an increase in the circulation of a magazine is attained by positive action in the form of constantly attempting to publish better stories, better covers and better features, to say nothing of occasionally introducing a fresher and more up-to-date editorial policy. Certainly, popularity can never be brought about by a series of editorial complaints, which merely serve to discourage and alienate the average reader still further.

Continued on page 112

Infection

What was the curious parallel between life on Venus and a strange new illness which had come to plague it?

Illustrations by Arthur Thomson

The three men walked unhurriedly down the lighted corridor, passed through a door marked *Authorised Personnel Only* and entered the launching shed. Their footsteps echoed hollowly on the floor and the whispering melancholy sound of the rain was clearly audible as it fell on roofs and walls.

"Looks like being a wet ride." Tacklin always made the same joke with almost reflex monotony as soon as he heard the rain. He didn't expect anyone to laugh and no one did.

"Yeah, yeah." Marty was squinting at the borer as if seeing it for the first time. Somehow it never failed to impress him, the immense rounded shoulders of the thing, the blunt bronze-coloured nose unit. . . . With the four broad treads running over and round the vehicle, each flange scooped and gleaming, it made one think of a prehistoric monster with four wide collars of armoured spines.

O'Brien, as usual, walked with his head down, hands thrust deep in his pockets, showing the bald patch on the top of his head. He

was chewing steadily and, at the same time, trying to whistle through his teeth.

He paused at the entrance of the borer and said: "You feel something?" He staggered a little. "Could have sworn the ground moved—quake?" He clutched at the metal door, shook his head worriedly like a dog shaking off water, and held his stomach. "I don't feel so good, Marty, I don't feel so good."

Marty caught him as the legs buckled and the weakening fingers slipped from the door.

Tacklin pressed the "Sick Alarm" and ran over. "He alright?"

"I'm damned if he is. Completely out."

"Sudden, wasn't it?"

"Too sudden, looks like Venderin to me." He pulled back the unconscious man's eyelids, frowning.

Tacklin, peering over his shoulder, nodded quickly and said: "Have to call the top, all cases of Venderin are reported to the top now, especially when they're S.B.E's." He crossed to the wall and pressed a black button. "Suspected Venderin case, priority call to Director Rhinehart."

Rhinehart was a big aloof man with a hard mouth and mane of prematurely white hair. "Yes?"

"O'Brien's collapsed, Mr. Rhinehart. We think it's Venderin fever."

Rhinehart said: "Damn, got a substitute?"

"Not on this field, sir."

"Right, I'll call Eastern field and have one sent over." He stretched out his hand to break contact and changed his mind. "Ambulance arrived?"

"Just here, sir."

"Tell them not to ship him out to a sanatorium but to hold him at Medics; I'm going to call the Institute." He cut contact and called the operator. "Get me the Venderin Pathological Institute."

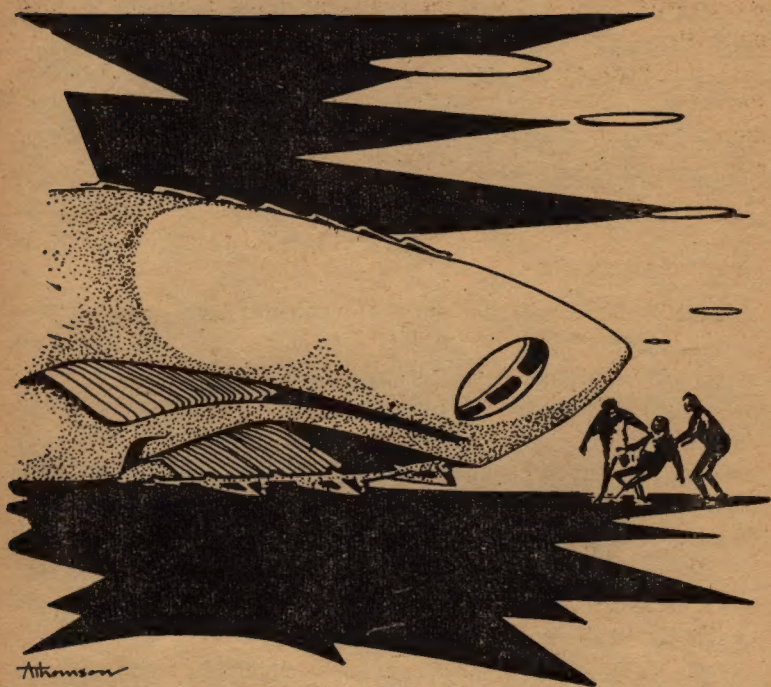
A tired looking, white haired woman answered the call. "Yes?"

"This is Marcus Rhinehart, General Sector Mining Company. I have one of my key men down with suspected Venderin. I want him transferred to you for special treatment."

The woman stared at him. "I'm afraid that is impossible, sir."

"Impossible!" It was a bark. "A man is sick. Am I to understand you are refusing treatment?"

She said: "Oh, God," tiredly then straightened. "Mr. Rhinehart, cases of Venderin are occurring at the rate of four hundred a



day. Secondly, we are not a hospital, we are an institute devoted to the biological side of the disease, further——”

Rhinehart brushed her words aside with a gesture of impatience. “Put me through to Doctor Fielding.”

“Doctor Fielding is in the laboratories and cannot be disturbed,” she said, coldly.

He said, in a harsh voice: “Must I repeat my request? I am Marcus Rhinehart, *the* Marcus Rhinehart. Inform Doctor Fielding of my call immediately, please.”

She was frightened now, frightened by his tone and by his reputation. She made helpless ineffectual gestures with her hands. “Please, Mr. Rhinehart, it’s more than my job’s worth—I’ll do my best.”

He saw her make connections, saw her head bow towards the vocal panel and the message, stumblingly, repeated.

“Tell him to go to hell!” said a voice and the connection broke abruptly.

Rhinehart selected a cigar from a box on his desk, placed it carefully between his lips and dialled again. “Get me the Area Governor”

Fielding paced angrily up and down, hands clasped behind his back. He was a small grey haired man with a pink face, tired blue eyes and an abrupt bird-like way of moving.

Pressure, pressure, nothing changed, nothing, particularly human nature. Big men with whips, dictating their terms, imposing their claims at the expense of the community, at the expense of the individual. The Migration should have wiped them out, the sacrifice, the labour, the inspiration, but it hadn't, they'd sprung up again like weeds, perhaps worse than before.

He stared angrily through the window at the everlasting rain. It was always raining, day after day, year after year. Yet the sickly mango-like vegetation drank it up thirstily, thrived on it like a disease. Here, always, everything was a disease, everything preyed on everything else with unrelenting savagery. Parasite preyed upon parasite, plant upon plant, fungus upon fungus. The ecologists had been pressed to find some form of life which was even as independent of another as the Earthly types and had failed.

He stared up at the low cloud as if seeing it for the first time and a pea-snake came sliding over the glass, undulating from side to side like a slowly manipulated yellow rope.

He rapped the window angrily, watching the creature break apart, a hundred scurrying discs running madly for safety. In a few minutes their panic would cease; they would creep back, one by one, and re-form to become a snake again. Thousands of discs, joined together by hair-like tentacles—a yellow rope sliding over a curved, rain-washed window. He hated them without reason—they were almost harmless—but some were miles long and went on and on until you wanted to scream because they never seemed to end.

He looked at the clouds again. Above, it was said, was the sun, but he had never seen the sun, nor, for that matter, had his father or even his father's father. No one, save the flyers, or space ship personnel, ever saw the sun. Yet, history said, it had been a common sight on Earth—when there had been an Earth.

The chimer on his desk brought an abrupt end to his train of thought. "Yes?"

"Marcus Rhinehart," announced the chimer.

"Have him shown in," said Fielding, coldly.

"Good day, Doctor Fielding." Rhinehart bowed. He preferred to be correct rather than overbearing. Power, after all, was demonstrable and did not require a prelude of bluster.

Fielding nodded curtly. "Good day, Mr. Rhinehart." His

own voice was equally controlled. "Please sit down. Drinks, cigarettes?"

"I have my own brand of cigars, thank you." Rhinehart sat down, crossing his legs. "I must apologise for my rather peremptory methods, but this particular case is one of considerable urgency."

"So," said Fielding, coldly, "are the three and a half million patients depending on the efforts of this institute to produce an antidote."

Rhinehart flushed angrily, but his voice when he spoke was still controlled and courteous. "I have taken the liberty of having my engineer moved here so that treatment may begin at once."

"You also took the liberty of using political pressure to gain your ends, thus jeopardising the recovery of every patient on the planet."

Rhinehart raised a deprecating hand. "Am I to understand that this Institute, and the hundreds of bio-technicians it employs, cannot function without you, Doctor Fielding?"

It was Fielding's turn to flush angrily, realising that Rhinehart had beaten him in the first verbal skirmish. To say "yes" was not only untrue but would brand him as a braggart. On the other hand, a denial left him defenceless and, after this, the other would probably have him replaced anyway. He sighed inwardly, suddenly weary and resigned. You worked, sweated, dedicated your life to an end, yet a man with power had only to snap his fingers. . . .

Rhinehart, conscious of his victory, smiled thinly but did not exploit his success. "We are wasting time in petty bickering; my employee is very ill."

"Yes, I will see him at once. I am afraid we shall have to use one of the staff rooms as a sick ward; this is an institute not a hospital."

He made a rapid examination of the sick man. Temperature was sub-normal, the pulse fast and respiration light and rapid. Blood tests confirmed the symptoms; there was the characteristic cellular deterioration of Venderin infection.

"A primary case—bad."

"He'll live?" Rhinehart's face was expressionless.

"We'll do the best we can." Fielding turned abruptly to his assistants. "Oxygen cubicle, type D internal feeding, auto-transfusions, andothrine and biocrethe injections to be given alternately every three hours." He turned back to Rhinehart, his voice controlled. "Some close friend or relative?"

"I know him by sight." Rhinehart stared at him, challenging him to comment.

Fielding shrugged almost imperceptibly, led the way into the adjoining room but did not commit himself.

Rhinehart extracted a cigar from his case, lit it unhurriedly, and looked at the other through the smoke. "O'Brien is a Specialist Borer Engineer." The magnate's voice was detached. "He's as valuable as a Pilot Astrogator and rarer. S.B.E.s are born not made, and he is one of my best." He paused, absently studying the tip of his cigar. "In case you're unfamiliar with deep-strata mining techniques, borer vehicles are employed and borers must be *driven*." For the moment Rhinehart had forgotten his dislike of the doctor and their earlier clash of opinions. Rhinehart was unscrupulous, a tycoon, but mining was also his business and his life. "Instruments can detect mineral deposits but cannot accurately assess their extent or quality. We have to send a borer to do the job properly and no amount of electronic gadgets seem to make the vehicle function as it should. Only an expert, an artist, can handle those things and bring them back in one piece—only experts like O'Brien."

Marty emerged slowly from the orders office. "No change in plans."

"Who's replacing O'Brien?"

"Tyson."

"Tyson!" Tacklin lit a nervous cigarette. "Isn't he the man who took that tumble out East?"

Marty said, expressionlessly: "He's the only spare to hand."

"God." Tacklin exhaled smoke. "Not many get over a tumble; they say he's a shaker below fourteen."

"So are we all inwardly," said Marty, harshly, "only we don't——" He stopped abruptly. "Here he comes."

Tyson was a tall sallow man with a long horse-like face and a thin moustache streaked like a pencil mark across his upper lip. There was sweat, Marty noticed, on the high forehead already, making it shiny in the light and heightening the suggestion of nervousness. He was a shaker alright, thought Marty. The rumours were true: Tyson's hysteria index would climb as the borer went down.

"The borer's in the shed," volunteered Tacklin. "She's a new job with special atolite packing between the shock walls, take anything in the way of heat or pressure."

Marty realised that Tacklin was trying to be helpful, trying to make Tyson feel at home and among friends. He admired the

attempt but held little hope for it; shakers responded to nothing until they changed their occupation.

Tyson nodded abruptly and nervously. "Good, good. Is she rationed up and everything?"

"Enough for ten days if we need it."

Again the jerky nod. "Fine, fine." A glance at his wrist watch. "Better get sealed in, hadn't we? Don't want to waste time, level eighteen is a long bore."

A hell of a long bore thought Marty wearily, as he sealed the door of the borer. Too long, there ought to be a law against it or something. He shook himself inwardly; no use thinking about it; you could crack that way. Shut up tight in a tin can with thirty-seven miles of earth and rock between you and the surface. Thirty-seven miles, maybe more; he turned his thoughts abruptly to other matters before the sweat could begin to prickle the surface of his skin . . .

"I should like to see your laboratories." Rhinehart's voice was still formal, still correct, yet with an inference of authority which was unmistakable.

"Certainly, Mr. Rhinehart." Fielding's tone was polite but without servility. If the man thought he was going to crawl, beg for his job, he could think again. "Where would you like to begin?"

"I would like to see how much you have learned about the complaint and the progress you have made against it."

Fielding nodded. "This way, please." He held open a sliding door. "This is the projection room; all we have learned can be fully demonstrated here." He snapped switches. "The two projections you are now seeing, show a comparison between a healthy cell and one infected by the virus. We assume it is a virus; it is non-filterable and sub-microscopic. Note the collapse of the infected cell, the shrunken appearance, as if something had eaten it from within."

"And the measures?"

"We've had fair success with two types of inhibiting serums which slow the rate of cellular deterioration and permit the patient's body to develop its own defences. In the last year, using these methods, we've cut the mortality rate from 93 to 75."

"No direct cure as yet?"

"We have an antibiotic which looks promising; tests on an infected culture were quite startling."

"You have produced this—er—substance?"

"In small quantities only. Tests take time and the remedy might be worse than the disease."

Rhinehart nodded. "It might, but have you tried it to see, injected it into a patient?"

"Good God, no." Fielding's voice was shocked. "It could be fatal without preliminary tests."

Rhinehart stared thoughtfully at the projected pictures. "In life one takes chances; it is the road to success."

"Are you presuming to teach me my business?" Fielding's voice was brittle with anger.

"No." The other's tone was unexpectedly mild. "Merely expressing a philosophy." He sighed. "Look, Fielding, you inject and a man lives or dies; if he lives, thousands live with him. If he dies—is the sacrifice of one life so damned important, Fielding?" He made an abrupt gesture, cutting short the other's angry retort. "You can't. I appreciate that. You take oaths, make promises and your ideals prevent expediency. I, on my part, make no promises; I see the objective clearly and I act." Almost, the heavy face smiled. "It is ruthless, unprincipled, savage, but it gets results. If I were in your position, Doctor, I would inject and to hell with the risk."

Fielding stared at him. He was still angry and resentful but at least Rhinehart had the saving grace of honesty. He saw his goal and went straight for it without self-justification or moral deceit. If one could not admire one could at least respect and understand.

The wall speaker crackled suddenly. "Calling Doctor Fielding, emergency pulse fluctuation, call——"

"Sorry to break this up." Fielding strode for the door. "Your man O'Brien has gone into stage four." Then, over his shoulder: "If you wish to watch, turn on number three screen by the chair and switch to channel five."

Rhinehart frowned, made as if to follow, then changed his mind. He sat down, lit a cigar and flicked on the screen. Much of what he saw and heard was beyond him but the drama was inescapable. A man was dying, slipping over the abyss, and a team of experts were labouring to hold him back. It became almost a personal struggle. An unseen, undetectable disease trying to thrust a man from life, and the doctor, countering each physical deterioration with some fresh application of experience.

Rhinehart watched with growing respect. The doctor might cling grimly and stupidly to outdated oaths and modes of conduct



but he had determination, skill and guts, qualities which could be praised and understood.

Rhinehart saw the artificial lungs wheeled in and applied with almost unbelievable speed and skill. He saw the delicate surgery and the maze of nerve connections as the mechanical cardiac machine took over from the painfully labouring heart.

"He's holding his own." Fielding leaned tiredly against the door. After ten hours' ceaseless and delicate work, there were lines about his mouth and dark smudges of weariness beneath his eyes. "It's-too early to say more."

Rhinehart nodded. "You worked damned hard. I admire your industry but deplore your ethics; you could have used the antibiotic."

"I could, but it might have killed him."

"Yes." Rhinehart reached for the edge of the door which seemed suddenly a world away. "Yes, that's your barrier to greatness, Fielding; ethics have no place in modern society." He tried for the door again, missed it, and pitched helplessly sideways before the other could catch him.

"God!" Fielding pressed the alarm buzzer and bent over the unconscious man, turning back his eyelids.

"Another?" It was Rawlins, his chief assistant. "Oh, Rhinehart himself. Shall we try the new antibiotic?"

Fielding had time only to scowl, realising that Rawlins must have been eavesdropping, then he was busy making check tests. Perhaps they had caught this one in time. . . .

The borer slid down the ramp, blunt nose first, like a newly launched sea-going ship and made a squelching sound as it hit the mud. Broad tracks spun noisily, spraying muck, then found purchase and dragged the machine forward uncertainly. At a snail's pace the thing growled through the rain, leaving behind it a tangle of flattened yellow trees and slimy vine. Within seconds the broad tracks left by the metal treads were filled with rain and were lost to sight as if they had never been.

Inside, Tyson, hunched over the control panel, was now sweating visibly and profusely.

"A shaker, alright," thought Marty, tiredly. It was going to be a rough trip. He glanced across at Tacklin who was gazing with apparent concentration at a cluster of dials and, at the same time, adjusting his safety belt.

Movement, as yet, was almost imperceptible. The control chamber was a carefully sprung sphere within the vehicle, the angle of which remained constant, regardless of externals. But there was noise, the treads thundered, muffled, but noisily about, rock and stone screeched when they scraped them and, as always, there were stressed-metal groans which nothing could stop.

Tyson glanced at the "Site Indicator" and flicked a red switch, shifting the centre of gravity to the blunt nose of the vehicle. "Site one, stand by."

Tacklin ran his hand down the sub-surface switches and watched a bank of dials brighten to luminous visibility, waiting.

The tracks clattered to a halt, the vehicle slid a few inches in the mud, then stopped. Then, very slowly, it began to lean forward, nose down to the muck, like a squat beetle rising on its hind legs. A haze formed about the bronze coloured nose, a haze in which a myriad of blue-green sparks danced and swirled like fire-flies. Before the haze, water turned to steam, rushing upwards and away, the muck boiled, blackened and flaked to dust.

Marty, watching the green finger of the Descent Dial creep slowly up, thought: "This is it, down under the surface." A borer going down like a submarine submerging, or as O'Brien often used to say: "Like a damned maggot eating its way into an apple."

"It's a spaceship in reverse," thought Marty, "with a grav

motor forward which slowly increases our immense weight to an insupportable degree. The borer slowly sinks because the surface of the earth can no longer bear its weight, the treads help it down while heat-gimmicks in the nose unit reduce the density of the matter through which it is boring."

Marty made a mental note that this was his hundred and fiftieth descent, adjusted his ear-comm and began his radar survey.

Tacklin was already calling his geological figures in the customary, almost traditional, sing-song and Tyson, still sweating, watched the thin, green descent line, his hands tight—too tight—on the control stick.

Marty frowned at the radar screen, his trained eyes interpreting the shifting wavy lines into a comprehensible picture. They bored blind, blinder than moles. There was no super vision screen to tell them what lay ahead. The probes sounded the rock around and ahead and flung their findings back into the screen, not as a picture but in wavy green lines which could only be interpreted by an expert.

Other instruments checked and interpreted, within limits, the type of rock formation through which they were passing. Dials told of pressures, external heat, angle of descent. . . .

He glanced at the descent dial again. At least Tyson was keeping to the regulation thirty degrees. Speed—twelve feet a minute—a metal bug—a damned maggot—eating its way into an apple.

Marty felt a sudden inexplicable sense of guilt. History said that man had done this on Earth, eaten into the planet like a blight. They'd drained the surface reservoirs of oil and mineral wealth and had been compelled to go deeper. From surface borings of three or four miles, they had finally reached fantastic depths probing almost to the limits of the planet's crust. Unfortunately there were repercussions, the causes of which had never been rightly determined. Some said they were caused by the pressure techniques used to hold open the borings for the robotic miners, others that man had eaten too much of the Earth's crust. Regardless of which school of thought was correct, there were still repercussions. A series of unprecedented subsidences and earth tremors began to occur all over the world which were but preludes to the titanic subterranean explosions which followed. Explosions which changed the face of continents and lifted mountains from the beds of oceans. Volcanoes spewed pumice and lava while new craters opened all over the world adding their quota of dust and sulphur to an already thickening atmosphere. Science was not slow to realise that within a few years

it would be a question of "get out or suffocate".

"We did it," thought Marty, bitterly. "We eat the guts out of the planet like a crowd of maggots eating the inside of an apple. We had to get out before it crumpled up beneath our feet."

The great Migration was Exodus of a race, the story of which was preserved in the archives of the cities as a tribute to the ingenuity and indomitable courage of man. Was it so praiseworthy to devour your home and be forced to leave it and find another? Now they were doing it again, metal maggots, burrowing into the flesh of a planet in search of ores and mineral deposits, only this time they were doing it efficiently. With the improved techniques and new methods of pressure mining, Venus, their new home, would probably blow her top in less than a thousand years. Maybe Mars too—part of the Migration had gone to Mars—and then where would they go? Unless, of course, the whispers about a stellar flight device were true.

His thoughts and feelings drifted away from Earth and the accompanying sense of guilt and he began to think about Mars. He remembered a space pilot telling him that it was dry on Mars, just miles and miles of dust and it never rained. Funny that, never raining, you couldn't imagine it somehow. Maybe the fellow exaggerated; it was fabulous, unbelievable, like those exotic looking pictures of Earth showing the sun blazing down on cities without roofs—wonderful but somehow impossible.

The borer shivered suddenly, vibrated, bouncing him in the sprung seat.

"Sorry." Tyson's voice was calm but a little high pitched. "I wasn't ready for that one."

"A shaker," thought Marty again. O'Brien would have ridden that one like a wave. O'Brien was good and, like all good S.B.E.s, rode the vehicle as if it were part of him. He would have *felt* the change in strata, been prepared for it, geared down for the sudden change in density. But Tyson—well, that's the way it was with a shaker. Over-concentration, uncertain reflexes, failing nerves—they gave you a rough ride.

Marty continued to let his mind wander. It was a trick he had learned a long time ago and it was a useful one. It was almost as if he were two men, one of which watched the screen with hawk-like but automatic attention, while the other mused and day-dreamed on a hundred subjects. The ability enabled him to relax for long periods and store up nervous energy for real emergencies. He had learned long ago to divert his thoughts from his position and his sur-

roundings—a miner had to. The dials might say that pressure within the vehicle was normal, the air pure, the temperature a comfortable sixty-five, but when you looked at the dials giving external readings you began to doubt. Only a few inches of steel and insulation between you and a pressure and heat like *that*. The dials might say that everything inside was normal, but you worried until you began to feel the heat and the pressure. You thought of the miles, and the millions of tons of rock between you and the surface and, unless you adjusted your mind fast, you went quickly and noisily insane.

Marty leaned forward suddenly and punched a button. A red light appeared on Tyson's control panel and his foot came down hard on the "stop" stud.

"What's up?" His voice in the ear-comm sounded high-pitched and reedy.

Marty, scowling at the screen, said: "I don't know, could be one of two things, a gas pocket or a river."

Tyson sweated, not bothering if it showed. If it was a gas pocket, the pressure might be prodigious. Blundering into it accidentally might blow them, or what was left of them, clean back to the surface. A river, this far down, might be worse; besides it was new. He had never heard of anyone boring accidentally into an underground river and it might be worse than anything he had ever heard about. He was unashamedly frightened and wished he could find some excuse to return but could think of none. God, the time he'd come through the roof of that underground cavern had been sheer hell, the sensation of falling, of helplessness, the heart-jolting impact——

Tacklin was poring over the interpreter, clicking switches and reading dials. After a time he said: "Steam, probably leads to a geyser."

"We'll have to go round it." Marty was interpreting rock strata with the skill of long experience. "Level off, red bearing, nine."

"Red nine, level," said Tyson, automatically. He pulled back the control stick, geared-in the tracks and took his foot off the clutch too fast. The vehicle lurched, bucked, sharp rock screaming against her sides and, but for the safety harness, he would have smashed his face into the control panel. Somehow, he didn't know just how, they began to move forward almost steadily. "God," he thought, "I'm a shaker, a damn shaker, I ought to have quit months ago. I know it and they know it. They know I'm scared; they know my nerve has gone and I shouldn't be here—why am I?"

He gritted his teeth, trying to force himself to concentrate. "What had Marty said—nine? Yes, red nine." His thoughts wandered again, helplessly. "I'm here because I want the pay," he told himself. "The money is good and I've got to live. How long will I live in this racket? Maybe this is my last trip. God, if I get out of this one alive, it will be, I swear it."

He turned his head suddenly and said: "Eh?"

"Angle negative," Marty was shouting. "*Negative*, what are you trying to do—blast off or something?"

"Sorry, sorry." He made corrections hastily. Did the man have to shout like that? Hell, it was only a little error and the shouting in his ear-comm made his head ache even worse than before—Yes! His head ached, throbbed; it was an excuse to go back up. He was sick, really sick; he shouldn't have come. Got to get up and breathe again. Never take another bore, never; finish with it forever. Would he get there? Now that he'd made the vow, something might try to stop him, fate, luck. Something might try and trap him down here, buried, sealed up in a can. God, to get up, get up fast before it happened, before fate reached out and thwarted him—Oh God, all that rock, all those miles—

Something seemed suddenly to break loose inside him. He whimpered, not even understanding the voice shouting in the ear-comm.

"Ascend—up—you damn fool. You're going down."

Down? What did the man mean? He was going up—up to the surface and the clean fresh air. It would be too late. He couldn't breathe in this heat and he could hear the borer groaning under the stress, sagging—crumpling—He screamed.

Marty gave up shouting, realising its uselessness. The borer was going down, almost straight down and there was nothing he could do about it. The safety harness holding him in place had a locking device which automatically triggered itself loose when the motor stopped and not before. There were reasons for this. At full power a borer rocked, rolled and shuddered with incredible violence. A man who could free himself might do so and menace the safety of the whole vehicle. He might be hurled across the control room, not only destroying himself but, in crashing into vital instruments, render the borer completely inoperable.

Marty gripped the chair and fought the shaking, feeling that he was being beaten up and slowly becoming punch drunk. They were going down, if they kept going down they'd reach a point where the planet's crust was no longer solid but molten and even

the borer couldn't take that. She'd fold up like a crushed tin with them inside.

Suddenly the shaking stopped and the sudden silence was almost frightening.

Tyson was still, very still, slouched in the safety straps like a dead fish in a net.

"I found a wrench and threw it at him." Tacklin's voice was shaky and hoarse. "I had to do something; had to make him let go of the handle. It was a damn lucky shot."

Marty did not answer. He was listening, and listening, began to sweat. The borer was moving, lurching and sliding almost unnoticeably, but moving nonetheless.

A glance at the screen confirmed it. They were half way into a hole, an underground cavern formed when the planet was still molten. The nose and shoulders of the borer were through the cavern's roof and God knew what lay below. They might fall ten feet; they might fall a hundred, you couldn't tell.

The borer lurched, hard rock screeching against the sides. Marty had time to shout: "race for a tumble." And then they were falling. . . .

"I owe you a great debt, a very great debt." Rhinehart was quite lucid but very weak. He smiled faintly. "In your position I should have made some blunder, some minor error inhibiting recovery and thus ensuring my own safety. I don't suppose such an idea even occurred to you."

Fielding said brusquely: "You are still a very sick man and, I fear, the sickness is liable to be recurrent."

"Recurrent?"

"Like certain Earth fevers, malaria for example, you'll have periodic, unpredictable attacks."

Rhinehart's mouth tightened. "Bluntly, I am a permanent invalid?"

"Well——"

"No comforting words, please. I'll just tell you this, nothing beats me, *nothing*."

Fielding kept silent, conscious of a sudden pity. Not even Rhinehart's indomitable will could lift the weakened body to its feet and back to its original strength.

Rhinehart tried to raise himself on his elbow and failed. "You have an antibiotic—use it. Do you hear me? Use it. I'd rather

die than—I give you complete authority. I'll sign any paper you wish."

"Impossible." Fielding's voice was brittle. "Absolutely out of the question."

"Your damned ethics again, I suppose?"

"I'm sorry—you must rest now. I'll see you have sedatives and, remember, you must not excite yourself." He left the room.

Five hours later he was called on the emergency line. Rhinehart was suffering convulsions and running a high temperature.

Fielding checked him, almost with disbelief. There must be some other condition besides Venderin but what, for God's sake? Hasty laboratory tests revealed a culture which shouldn't have been—and hadn't been—present at all.

Very quietly Fielding left the room, his face a rigid mask, and passed into the staff quarters.

He caught Rawlins, his chief assistant, packing.

"Going away?"

Rawlins looked up. "Yes, just getting ready, vacation in a week you know." He had one of those frank friendly faces and the wide set eyes which the ignorant call honest, but which quite often hides a lack of scruple and weakness of will which is visible only to the discerning.

Fielding closed the door and leaned against it. "How much did he give you?"

Rawlins straightened and said convincingly: "Who? What are you talking about?"

"Rhinehart," said Fielding, "has a C4 type culture in his blood stream." His voice, even to himself, sounded rasping and toneless. "A C4 type culture is only present in the experimental antibiotic. How did it get there?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"You should know because you gave it to him." Fielding took a step forward. "He offered you money and you gave him a two cc shot of the stuff."

"Did I, now?" Rawlins' voice was sneering. "Prove it."

Fielding stiffened inwardly. Rawlins was clever and unscrupulous but, to give him credit, he knew his job. It was unlikely that he would leave loose ends around which could be traced to himself.

"You were the only one besides myself who knew where it was and how to administer it."

Rawlins' frank open face had a long almost feline smile. "That may have been true five hours ago; since then we've been doing

intensive micro-tests. At least twenty lab assistants and three bacteria-biotics people watched its effect in a culture tray."

Fielding said, bitterly: "You stinking unprincipled louse."

The frank smile vanished briefly, then returned. "It's your word against mine, Fielding." He walked round the pile of cases. "So for your ears alone and strictly off the record, it's all tied up legally. If Rhinehart dies I'm still covered, four witnesses, his own top lawyer on the soli-trans and the whole episode ratified by a Robotic justice." He laughed at Fielding's expression. "In the eyes of the law, it's a gift." He made an abrupt gesture of contempt and turned his back. "Get lost, Fielding, there's nothing you can do about it. Any one of over twenty assistants could have been bribed to give Rhinehart that shot."

"Yes." Fielding's voice was vague. He removed his white laboratory coat and folded it carefully, laying it on the nearest chair. "How much did you get?"

Rawlins turned, walked round the cases. "What's that to you? Sorry you didn't cash in first?" He laughed. "For your personal envy, Dr. Fielding, half a million, weep at nights about that."

Fielding edged imperceptibly closer, he was smiling thinly. "Now let me tell you something, Rawlins, even you can't get away with it completely."

"What are you going to do—shoot me?" Rawlins was sneering again.

"Not quite. Back on Earth there used to be an historic sport called boxing. A few groups here still practise it as a keep-fit art and I've been told I was rather good."

"Yeah?" Rawlins topped Fielding by nearly a foot.

"Yes." Fielding hit him as hard as he could in the face. Rawlins went backwards over the cases, lay there, then climbed to his feet, fists clenched. Then he kicked the cases aside and rushed.

Fielding chopped him twice as he went past and jolted his head back with a right to the mouth as he turned. He waited until Rawlins was panting from several of his bull-like rushes, then closed in. Deliberately, with almost clinical detachment, he began to chop him to pieces.

He left Rawlins whimpering and broken among his cases, his face a bloody mask, and closed the door carefully behind him. Now that it was done there seemed very little satisfaction, save that he had meted out a rough justice. Rawlins had betrayed his oath for money. In Fielding's opinion he should have been executed.

He returned slowly to the sick man's room and the physician-in-

charge looked up, frowning. "This is damn funny, Doctor. The muscular contractions are lessening and the Venderin cellular breakdown seems to have been halted." He held up a slide. "Look, you can see the effects clearly. Whatever other disease he contracted seems to have cured the infection. Can't say I understand it—it's a miracle."

Fielding shook his head slowly. "Not a miracle, Stapleton, a colossal gamble and Rhinehart won it."

Marty regained consciousness slowly, finding himself in complete darkness with an acrid smell of burning insulation in his nostrils. With a hand which didn't seem to be his own he felt for, and found, the heavy emergency torch which was clamped beneath the seat.

The beam cut a blue-white swath through the darkness, revealing oily tendrils of smoke creeping apparently from nowhere.

Tyson had his head on one side at a curious angle as if his neck was broken and Tacklin lay in his chair making strange gurgling noises.

Somehow Marty got the straps undone, somehow he lurched across the floor, fumbled for the main fuse and almost whimpered with relief. It was gone. It was designed to blow in an emergency to save the subsidiaries. The torch revealed the silvery dust and bright shards of the miniature explosion beneath the primary circuit panel. Fumbling and swearing with the dreary monotony of a shaken man, he fitted another and re-activated the circuit.

Shutters tumbled, a multitude of micro-relays began to tick like beetles, and, very softly, the air purifier chuckled to itself and purred to life. After a series of uncertain flickers, the lights came on.

Marty leaned against the wall, put his hands over his face and sobbed with relief. If the main circuit functioned they stood a chance. The temperature dial which had risen to 110 degrees, internal heat, began to creep slowly backwards.

Tacklin coughed throatily, called three times for help, then straightened and said, in a normal voice: "I feel like hell. I suppose we are alive?"

"So far." Marty ran his fingers down a row of switches and studied the check lights—one was ominously dead. "We've lost a track."

Tacklin, rummaging in the medical cabinet for soothene tablets, said: "That's bright, let's hope it's just out and not buckled." He swallowed noisily and began to fumble with the safety straps. "I

don't think I've broken any bones but my spine feels as if it's coming out through the top of my head."

"Tyson is dead." Marty's voice was coldly factual.

"Did I kill him?"

"No, his neck is broken. Come over and help me shift him. I'll have to take over, try and get her up."

They moved the dead man, strapped the body in Marty's chair and turned back to the controls.

Marty had taken an S.B.E's course as a compulsory part of his training but it wasn't his forte and he knew it. Getting her up was going to be like riding a ram-jet with erratic and unpredictable timing.

He bent down and slid back No. 3 inspection panel, revealing the complicated wiring of the gravity circuits and switched the transitter valves as he had been taught. He had always frankly admitted that he didn't understand how the field worked and was never likely to. You had a borer which weighed five thousand tons. You switched on the grav' field and the weight doubled, trebled, multiplied as the field increased and finally the false gravity pulled you down. When you wanted to come up, you switched the transitter valves, fed in power and the field was reversed but you didn't get lighter like a space ship, you got heavier in reverse.

An instructor had once said: "You merely reverse the traction field, Mr. Marty, the immense artificial weight which pulled you down, now pushes you up."

Marty scowled at the closed panel. He knew it worked but it still made no sense.

"All set?" He climbed into the control chair and began to buckle the safety straps. This was going to be tricky, very, very tricky. According to the instruments the borer had fallen twelve feet which was the hell of a fall for five thousand tons with a plus field. When he switched on, the bottom was going to be the 'top' and, unless he was very careful and got the field properly balanced, they'd crash into the roof with perhaps greater force than they'd hit the floor.

He ran his hand along the bank of switches, trying to remember everything he had been taught. "Ready?"

"Ready." Tacklin sounded resigned.

Red, white, *click, click*—watch it! Two parallel lines, red and green, in the central indicator dial, bring them together slowly for balance. Stick forward—easy—easy—up the stick a bit more, a fraction. Red line must move very slowly across the green—

Here we go——ah! ——Were they moving? They must be, *must* be.

A sudden heavy but bearable impact. The lights flickered uncertainly then returned to their normal brilliance.

On blue, off white, *click, click*——made it!

He turned in his chair and grinned twistedly. "Alright?"

"Alright!" Tacklin raised a greasy thumb. "Nice going, Marty, we'll make it now."

Back on stick, build up field, *click, click*, feed in power——*now*. And she's making it, making it, she's boring, boring, going up. . . .

A metal bug, a beetle upside down on the roof of a cavern, pushing its nose at the surface—a maggot eating its way out of an apple. . . .

Rhinehart said: "We shall never understand one another, shall we?" He was recovering rapidly and already sitting up.

"You took the hell of a chance." Fielding shook his head, sweating at the thought. "But I'll grant you gave us the answer. We know how to use it now, can eradicate the factors which might have made it lethal. Further, we can draw, and duplicate, a serum from your body which means that a programme of immunisation can begin almost at once." He smiled a little twistedly. "We have no choice but to call it the Rhinehart Treatment."

The Magnate shook his head. "The Fielding Treatment, please—I insist." He looked at the other thoughtfully and said, again: "No, we cannot understand one another but we can respect." He held out his hand.

Fielding took it without reservation. Rhinehart was ruthless, overbearing and without scruple but he had intellectual self-honesty and courage. The latter qualities Fielding could not fail to respect.

An orderly came in. "Mr. O'Brien is showing marked improvement, sir." He hesitated. "These photographs were found in the asepsis room, sir. I think they must be his."

Fielding glanced at them and frowned. Then he fumbled in his pockets and produced another.

"Something wrong?" Rhinehart was looking at him curiously.

Fielding laid the photographs on the bed. "O'Brien's photographs show a picture of Earth before our grandfathers left it." He paused. "The second is recent, probably taken in the last few years by a spacer."

"So?"

Fielding leaned forward. "This is my own photograph, taken with a micro-camera—a Venderin infected life cell. Compare it with the recent photograph of Earth."

Rhinehart nodded. "There is, certainly, a startling similarity, both shrunken, shrivelled, looking as if they had been eaten from within—What are you implying?"

Fielding shook his head. "I guess I've been working too hard recently, imagining things." He laughed uneasily. "I was just thinking, we've devoured Earth, we're doing the same to Venus and Mars. If reports are true, soon we'll gain the stars and perhaps do the same there—" He stopped.

"Go on, you interest me." Rhinehart was leaning forward.

Fielding made a helpless gesture. "It occurred to me, maybe we aren't quite so big as we think we are. Perhaps in the body of the Universe we have no standing at all until we begin to hurt. Just an unfilterable, sub-microscopic virus, a blight—an infection. Maybe, if we aren't careful they'll send a cosmic doctor to cure *us*."

PHILIP E. HIGH

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Survey Corpse

*Another planet to survey, another challenge only
to be met by men united and with courage*

Illustration by Arthur Thomson

Never mind what star it was—that isn't important. Don't bother to seek a name for the planet—that doesn't matter. Admit that the planet was Earth sized, with safe terrestrial type air and continents and seas and a Go type star shining happily down; but this pleasing catalogue doesn't signify. The world was about as like Earth as you'd expect to find in a parsec's flight among the sifting dust of the galaxy; about how a wooden leg resembles and does duty for a man's own flesh and sinew and bone and muscle. But none of that's important.

A spaceship dropped on force stilts to the surface. That was about as important as a tin can landing on a rubbish dump. Six men descended from the airlock and stood on spaceweary legs and surveyed the landscape.

They were important.

Six men, who had lived, eaten, slept, breathed, worked together. Six human beings who had been cooped up in a metal

shell skyrocketing across nothingness from one lump of mud to another.

Metal and plastic and glass and earth and trees and all the clever-clever tricks of science, meeting for the one and only end of putting six very ordinary but very important men upon the surface of a world different from that of their birth.

Not because they had crossed the millions of miles of dust-strewn emptiness were they important; they were important because they were men.

The first of these men to set foot upon the alien planet was the captain. He stood there quite still, quite silently, breathing long and slow, looking about, the creases beside his eyes puckered against the alien sun.

Silently, the other five men dropped down the ladder to stand beside him. Away off to the north the hills rose, slumbrous, purple, hazy across the great plain. Dust puffed across the plain, sere brown whirlpools rising and falling; a breeze tufted the men's hair and rustled past them to stir and set talking the myriad leaves of the forests at their backs.

"Well, skip, we made it," said McGarrity the engineer, ugly-faced, carrotty-haired and smiling. "But 'twill be a miracle if we see old Earth again."

The captain did not reply. Lenson the geologist, taut and pimply and soured by too much space, did that for him.

"Why keep yapping about Earth, McGarrity? We've three more planets to survey yet. If you can't keep your stinking engines running we'll all——"

"Sure ye will! And even when you're screaming your guts out in the wreck you'll all still be blaming McGarrity."

The other crewmen were spreading out, going about their prepared tasks on this alien world. The three men were left standing beneath the rocket. The captain stood between the other two, dark, unsmiling, feeling the flow of strength from his body into the needs and weaknesses of the five men he commanded and for whom he was responsible.

Lenson said savagely: "We should have been given a first rate engineer."

"And who're ye to pick on me?" demanded McGarrity. "I'm a first class engineer and you darn well know it."

"This crate's been shaking like a child with Venusian rot-fever."

The captain let them spew it out, allowed each to lance the other's boil of frustration and fear and pent up fury.

"I tell you this, Lenson, so help me. The engines'll take five more periods of maximum thrust. I'll not guarantee one more."

"And," said the captain, moving forward. "We'd all like one of those periods to be during our planetfall on Earth." He motioned with his hand. "There's all this world to be looked at. You're part of the team to do that, Lenson. And you, McGarrity, have your engines to look at. Suppose we all think about our jobs, huh?"

"Sure, skip," said Lenson at once. He collected his gear from the stack at the foot of the ladder.

"Work," McGarrity said, both hands on his hips. "Always work. It's just a job, sure it is. Hopping from one planet to the next, measuring, ruling, collecting, writing reports. This job is one for the suckers, all right."

"I wouldn't say that," remarked the captain, easily.

McGarrity swung towards the ladder. "I'll get even with that bog-cur Lenson," he said darkly as he went up the rungs.

On their second morning the doctor cornered the captain under one of the branching fins of the rocket. The metal gouged the red dust that had sifted over the calcined areas. The sun threw strong shadows. Dust blew finely.

"Results show promise, skip?" The doctor had the professional slickness of his tribe; but underneath there smouldered a fierce resentment against undead tribal gods that had survived ten years of Terran Survey Corps service.

"Sure." The captain described small circles with his toe in the dust. "Sure. Those forests back there are full of wild life and timber. The plains ahead are full of minerals and with a little landscaping can fill with corn. Oh, sure, this is a number one planet, fair enough."

"I just gave Lenson a checkup," said the doctor, not inconsequentially. "Physically, he's sound as a venturi."

"But . . . ?"

"Bee in his bonnet about our assignment. Wants to fight McGarrity, personally, so's we carry on."

"I see."

"Can we, skip? I mean, is McGarrity right? Must we return to Earth prematurely?"

"Sam's taking his flier eastwards today, doc. I'd rather like you to go along with him." The captain pushed himself upright

from the rocket's fin. He allowed a small friendly smile to form on his face. "Trip out in the fresh air do you good."

"Wilco, skip," said the doctor. He walked away. Watching him go, the captain allowed his little smile to fall to pieces.

When Sam's flier, bearing the doctor, had vanished high in the serene blue, the captain went looking for the biophysicist. This was one man who did not ask questions that had no answers this side of sanity.

"Hi, Shep," he said, walking up and squatting on an up-turned sample case. "How's it coming?"

"Figure we ought to set down somewhere in that forest. Find us a nice clearing."

"Tricky, Shep. Landing into a forest—you never know what's underneath you till you touch down. Then it might not be what you expect."

"The ground car ventilation blew out yesterday. I got roasted coming back." Shepkin stretched, leaning up, revealing the small naked body upon which he had been working. "Still—I found this'n."

The captain looked with compassion at the tiny body. "I know you always like to dissect one specimen right down to check on anything unusual right away," he said. "But I always prefer it when you just slip 'em into bottles."

Shepkin shook his overlarge head, bending back to continue his deft butchery. "Gotta find out just what we might be up against right away. Nothing particularly odd about this little fellow—four legs, a head, two eyes and a mouth and breathing slits. Except this. Here, look."

Taking the animal's tail, he started at Shepkin's quick: "Steady! That's as sharp as my scalpel." He held the object gingerly. The tail was flat and long, a central bony ridge flattening out to a double-bladed knife of bone.

Shepkin took it back, produced a paper handkerchief, sliced the tissue with the tail. "See, skip? Razor sharp."

"Why?"

The biophysicist blew out his cheeks. "Don't know. Yet. Weapon, of course. Look at the feet—curved claws with nails like grappling hooks."

"Tree climber?"

"Looks like it."

"Well, when you have a few more specimens you'll probably have the bug this tail is meant to decapitate."

Shepkin laughed shortly. "Decapitate. Sure. Why don't Lenson belt up? He's souring the whole mob."

"He believes in the job, Shep. He really lives it. Every minute of every day he's carving out new frontiers for Earth. He's the rugged frontiersman. He never lets up."

"Well, if McGarrity don't push his face in soon, I'll line up for that assignment."

"Take it easy." The captain rose. "Lenson knows his job. We're all touched a little, in some way. Wouldn't be here if we weren't."

"Yeah. The job goes on. Sick your insides up, lose your arms and legs, go blind, deaf, dumb—crawl on stumps and drink dust; but the job must be done. Hurrah for the Terran Survey Corps." He thrust a scalpel with vicious humour into his workbench. "Hell! And that's all the emotion and glory ever do get you—just more work, re-sharpening scalpels. What a life."

"We've another three planets after this one, Shep," the captain said, and left the lab quickly. He climbed up to the control room. There was an odd air of pathetic loss about the empty control positions. He checked the clock and switched on the planetary radio. Sam's voice came in strongly and he exchanged a ten-minute check with him and the doctor. As he spoke into the microphone his eyes looked steadily through the control ports off towards the forests beckoning along the edge of the plain.

Lenson entered the control room. The captain cut the radio connection and said: "Hullo, Lenson. How's it coming?"

"Fine. Just fine. Enough ores out there to last a new colony for centuries. We ought to be able to build up this planet into a really big thing; an important unit in the Terran Commonwealth."

The captain looked at the geologist, masking the intensity of his scrutiny. "Ever think of settling down on one of the new worlds you open up, Lenson?"

Lenson laughed. "Settle down? Me? With all the Galaxy waiting to be opened up?"

"Over a hundred thousand habitable planets, at least," the captain said as though musing. "No man has that many lifetimes, Lenson."

"I'll get by, I'll get by," Lenson said quickly. He hadn't even understood the captain's remark. "Wanted you to take a look at this sample. I figure if we moved off a little and set down nearer those mountains we could——"

"Always tricky setting down near mountains. Never know what's under you."

"I suppose you're going to set down in that damned forest? You and Shepkin always——"

"Think I'll take a shower," the captain said, rising and turning to face Lenson squarely. "Get's kinda hot in this tin can."

He showered and shaved and changed. His mind was fixed upon the problem of Lenson. The geologist's frame of mind was not unknown and probably had been labelled by a polysyllabic extravaganza that the doctor had been too wise to parade before his skipper. The men of the Terran Survey Corps were all volunteers; they were where they were and doing the job they had to do because they believed that this was the best way a man could live. There was none of the nauseating falsity of the comic-strip space explorer, forever moaning about what he was going to do when he got back to Earth and could hit the bright lights down Piccadilly. These men expected to get back to Earth in due course—when that happened they would then give to life the same intensity as they gave it here, on an alien planet-under an alien star.

Always providing, that is, that McGarrity got them back safely.

The captain allowed four or five days to pass before he suggested a new site. Both Lenson and Shepkin were at once in favour, pressing for the merits of their own sites. McGarrity frowned and warned about what he could and couldn't guarantee. Sam and the doctor listened with varying degrees of patience.

Finally the captain said: "We will move to the other side of the forests, past that second range of mountains you found, Sam. That way we can set down on that tongue of land between mountain and forest. We can collar the best of both worlds, then. After that we'll move once more to a seaboard location."

"And after that?" asked McGarrity.

"We'll have three guaranteed periods of maximum thrust left, which will give us one in hand for emergencies."

Lenson stood up awkwardly. His face was pale. "You mean we're going home?"

"I think," the captain said carefully. "It would be wise."

"Hear, hear," said McGarrity.

The others sat around the wardroom in silence.

"But we've the job to do!" Lenson put out a hand as though to appeal. He changed his mind, and, turning on his heel, scuttled

from the room. The others breathed out; their pent up breaths a sigh of compassion.

The captain quirked an eyebrow at the doctor.

"When he's convinced, he'll be all right again. But just at the moment we might—that is—well, it might be best if we refrained from mentioning going home to him."

"Humour him, you mean?" demanded McGarrity.

"Is he bats?" asked Sam, as though the idea were fresh and startlingly original.

Shepkin did not say anything. He toyed with a scalpel, flicking it about in his fingers. Everyone always expected a few odd fingers to drop onto the floor whenever Shepkin sat in thought.

The ship rose complainingly when McGarrity gave his permission. The captain tossed her as lightly as a leaf into her new position and set her down as though landing on eggs. McGarrity put his carroty head in through the hatch and said: "Four to go."

"Yah! Elijah!" said Sam pleasantly. He was a young, feckless airman, and was said by the others to believe that his flier could take them anywhere in the Galaxy. He was also ship's meteorologist.

"As a prophet," said McGarrity insultingly, "you'd rain us out every time the sun shone."

The two indulged in a friendly scrimmage. The captain smiled. Morale was perking up.

The biophysicist and the geologist wasted no time in surveying their new areas. Pressing on one side the forest brooded, dark green sea shot through with the vivid orange of exotic bloom, on the other the mountains scaled the sky, slaty, grey, pinnacled the horizon and casting long shadows across the alien land.

Hitherto the problem of who was to use the ground car and who the flier had been settled by geography; now the decision would have to be artificial—and imposed by the captain.

"You'd better take Lenson today, Sam," he said with just enough firmness in his voice to ward off any humorously insubordinate remarks. "Take the ground car. Your flier's useless—if you'll pardon the notion—around those peaks and gulleys."

Shepkin—thankfully—waited until he was alone with the captain before he spoke. Then, his big head and dark, heavy features set in what would, in anyone else, have been sullenness, he said: "Lenson's got the transport. I walk?"

"You walk, Shep."

At that moment a crackling barrage of profanity burst up from

the open airlock. Men were shouting and struggling; there rang the sound of metallic blows on metal.

The captain and Shepkin dead heated for the airlock. Shepkin stopped to glance down. The captain went straight on, shinning down the ladder in a slither of speed.

Lenson and McGarrity were struggling and sprawling on the ground, their clothes dust streaked, their arms and legs awkwardly moving, like water-trapped insects. Sam and the doctor stood around, hesitant.

"Grab McGarrity," the captain said briefly. He took Lenson's collar in both hands, felt a red fist connect on his cheek, and heaved back. As he fell, he twisted and humped around, so that Lenson was between him and the ground. Then, breathing hard, he stood up and gave Lenson one or two experimental shakes. "Nothing broken," he said.

"I'll murder the——"

"Shut up, McGarrity." The captain was blazing with anger. "I don't want to know what happened. Both of you could be shot for this, on my order. Don't be so smug that you think I wouldn't give that order." He brushed dust from his face and winced as his fingers touched the sore spot. "Now shake hands. Then we can get on with the job."

Lenson and McGarrity shook. Their hands clung for the time a molecule of salt remains dry dropped in water.

"Get on with the job," McGarrity said, slouching away. "Always the misbegotten job."

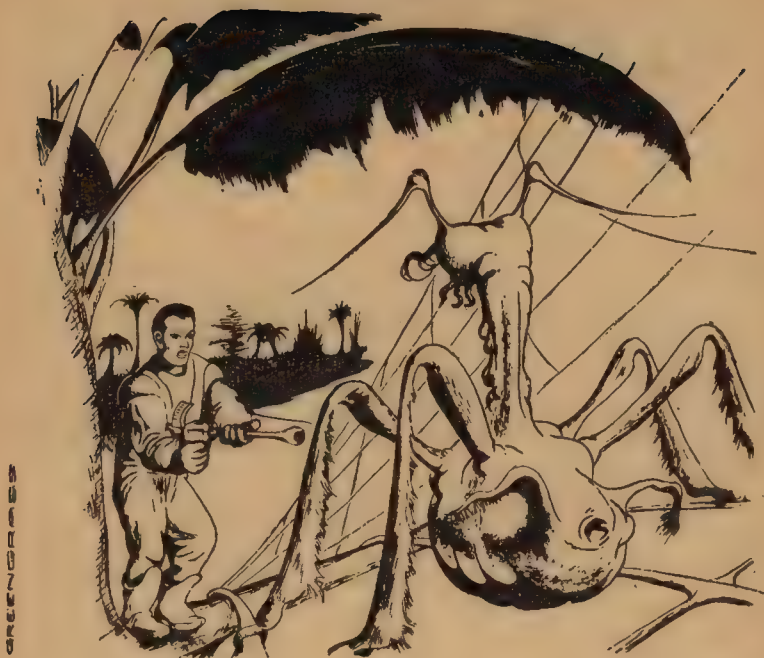
"Come on, Lenson," said Sam. "We're taking the ground car." He began to walk away and then turned, saw Lenson's burning face and twitching lips. "Come on, man!"

Watching them walk towards the parked ground car, the captain felt his age. He squared his shoulders, feeling an idiot to believe that he could find strength in himself, and said to McGarrity: "You'd better hike off with Shep today. You'll have a chance to walk it off. I hope you enjoy it."

"My feet," moaned McGarrity, and began whistling as he loaded himself with the sample containers pointed out by Shepkin.

The doctor walked through into the laboratory after the captain had not gone in to dinner, to find him working with a plate of forgotten sandwiches at his elbow. The sun was sliding in its twenty-seven hour day towards the horizon.

"Hullo, doc," said the captain. "Don't bother me. I'm busy."



"You'd better eat, skip. Take ten. And I thought you'd better know that McGarrity was fighting Shep's battles for him."

"I'd guessed that. But I don't want to hear. If Lenson is to last this trip out we've all—including McGarrity—got to learn to live with him. Shep can fight his own wars, McGarrity knows that. The ground car was an infantile excuse for a brawl."

"McGarrity's a red-headed——"

"He's one of the best. So's Lenson. One wants to go on striding through the starfields, conquering more and more worlds for Earth. The other's worried about nursing his failing engines and getting us all home safely. You light the fuse—the tinder's knee high."

The snarling grumble of the car caught their attention. Sam ducked in through the hatch, blowing and licking his lips.

"Ground cars," he said. "I've spat 'em. I'm bushed."

Lenson followed. "Can you help me with these specimens?" he said to the company at large. "Very successful day. These mountains are older extrusions—entirely different from the others. We're on to a gold mine here." He laughed.

The captain laughed. Presently, catching on, Sam and the

doctor tittered. "Right, Lenson," the captain said, rising from his lab bench. "I'll give you a hand. Sam, go and get washed. We'll eat as soon as the others get back."

By the time the specimens were neatly boxed in the geologist's flat and the dinner had been automatically heated from its pre-cooked containers, the sun had been jagged into glowing splinters by the forest treetops. The captain looked at the clock.

"Why can't Shep and McGarrity get a move on?" asked Sam. "I'm starving."

"You'd better go ahead and eat." The captain rose from the table and moved to the port. "Think I'll take a little mosey——"

His words were shattered by the stumbling footfalls. Everyone rushed for the airlock and McGarrity fell into their waiting arms. His clothes were ripped and caked in mud, and blood shone evilly in the last rays of the sun.

"Shep!" McGarrity choked out. "Damn great spider's got him." McGarrity, all his strength gone, collapsed.

Sam had the ground car growling away in minutes. The captain and the doctor crouched in the rear, peering over the driving seat, following their crazy progress in the flaring light of the floods. The captain put one hand up and touched the cold oiled slickness of the express rifle in its beackets against the car's roof. *Shep*—he thought—and stopped that line of thinking at once.

McGarrity's last words as they had left danced in the captain's brain. "Can't miss him. Blazed the tree."

The car ate up the distance. The wall of forest reared higher against the first faint stars.

"Lenson—and McGarrity." The doctor's voice was a low blur. "We've left them together—alone."

"They'll make out," the captain said, tonelessly. "They'll have to."

Now the forest was extending welcoming arms—entrapping arms. The headlights grooved the darkness. The captain swivelled the searchlight. Tree trunks span in silver lines past, leaves and blooms glowed into fiery colour and then died into ashes as the beam passed.

"There!" Sam took one hand off the wheel and pointed.

A tree trunk showed in the questing light, a great ragged tear showing oozing gum where the bark had been roughly stripped away. Silver threads glinted. The captain had the impression of hundreds of little glittering eyes all staring at him unwinkingly from the forest gloom.

They leaped from the car and ran forward, flashing torches up into the branches, along the ground, into the thickets. The captain tucked the rifle under his arm.

"Can you see him?"

"No sign!"

"Nothing."

"Spread out." The captain swung his arm. The men's boots crackled on fallen twigs. About them the silence of the forest was uncanny; here they expected the never-ending night chittering of wild-life and the pulsing throb of a twice-alien world.

The minutes passed. Each tree was carefully examined. They passed the blazed trunk, penetrating deeper into the forest glades. Above their heads the branches came together, shutting out the stars. To a spaceman no sight of the stars was like being buried alive.

A frantic panic communicated itself to the three men. Their breathing gasped loud and ragged from their chests. A simultaneous passion shook them, so that they raged against the trees and the night and against this alien planet.

"I'm going up!" the captain shouted, beside himself with fury and fear and expectant terror. He began to climb awkwardly up the tree, the express rifle slung over his shoulder thumping him painfully in the kidneys at each upward lunge. The doctor's upflung torch beam fluttered against the tree trunk and his eyelids. The bark was hard and sandpapery, tearing at his flesh.

Fifteen feet up he paused for a breather and looked about. Darkness encompassed everything above. Below, the two torch beams sprang up, half-blinding him, throwing silver splotches of colour onto branches and leaves. On either hand the forest stretched away, enigmatic, waiting, gleeing in his helplessness.

Then he saw the first web.

"My God!" he shouted, appalled.

The torch beams wavered, seeming to cling together for comfort, then swerved wildly apart to focus upon the centre of the web. It was like looking into the spinning heart of a whirlpool. The web, shimmering, vibrating, immense, seemed to suck the breath from his body and the sense from his mind.

He clung to a branch, feeling dizzy and sick, and forcing himself to study the web and its surroundings in the flickering erratic light of the torches. There was still no sign of Shepkin. McGarrity had blazed the tree. Wildly, the captain manoeuvred his body against the trunk, looking backwards, shining his own

torch. Yes. The tree was there, the dark scar of the shredded bark like a prehensile nose. Something like thirty feet separated the blazed tree and the tree up which the captain had climbed. The web filled the entire space.

"Keep away from it!" he shouted at the doctor. The man's figure straightened. The torch beam made a wide drunken movement.

"Incredible—little-finger thickness, tacky, tough, springy——"

"We'll see to that later. Where's Shep?"

He was overcoming the shock of the web now. The fantastic was run-of-the-mill for explorers and surveyors of the Terran Survey Corps. He carved the darkness with his torch, cursing the night. Sam's torch jumped. "Hey—McGarrity—what d'you think you're doing here?"

Other torches were flickering now. Lenson and McGarrity. Running all the way from the spaceship to join in the rescue of one of their comrades.

"Watch it, skip!" That was McGarrity, hoarse voiced, nearly throttled with panting exertion. "There's webs all around."

The five men slashed their torches about in the stultifying darkness, seeking, searching, prying. McGarrity scrambled up the tree he had blazed. Torch between his teeth he elbowed up until he was ten feet above his skipper on the other tree. Between them the great web pulsed.

"Any signs?" That was Lenson, on the ground, frantic.

"Not a one."

Time rolled over the captain in shattering waves. Whatever had taken the biophysicist—spider, McGarrity had called it—might be doing anything now. Bilious rage spilled into the captain's throat. His teeth were chattering. He shone the torch carefully into every shadowed cranny along the periphery of the web. The silken strands jumped into and out of his line of vision like crazily spinning railroad tracks.

Lenson was up the tree after McGarrity now. Sam had run across to the other side, was shining his torch up.

"There he is!" screamed the doctor.

His torch picked out the bundle, wrapped and lashed like a sailor's hammock. The captain's teeth stopped chattering. He put one hand on the nearest strand of the web.

"Let me, skip!" McGarrity was wholly on the web now. His squat ugly body edged out, his carrotty hair the colour of dried blood in the flashing torchlight. The web before the captain's face

hummed. He stared up. The bundle that was Shep swayed from side to side, revolving slowly on a single suspending strand. Was there movement above it? Were there—*were* there two gleaming eyes? The captain peered closer.

"Look out, McGarrity!" He seized the web before him and began to shake it violently. McGarrity's body pendulumed, and the lines of strain met in the web, channelled out, flowed and sent confusing messages to the thing creeping out from a dark split in the higher branches.

Spider? *Spider!* No spider of Earth would bear the insult. Then—horror—*spiders.*

The captain dragged his tacky fingers from the web, unslung his rifle, slammed the butt to his shoulder. He was over the shakes now. Now, he knew what had to be done.

Lenson had seen, too. He uttered one horrified squeal and cowered back into the tree. Above him, above McGarrity crucified on the web, above the mummified form of Shepkin, the owners of the web were creeping forth to collect and bundle up more victims entrapped by their alien witchery. McGarrity, looking up, saw what was descending upon him. He was now bare feet from Shepkin.

"Come back, McGarrity!" howled the doctor and Sam, dancing insanely below. Torchlight, darkness, horror, springs of primeval evil combining and sweltering over these men trapped in an alien dream on an alien planet. McGarrity forced his way higher. The captain saw the flash of light from the knife in his hand.

Shepkin fell. Both Sam and the doctor rushed together, arms outstretched, like comic firemen without a jumping blanket. Shepkin struck them and the three collapsed onto the soft moss-covered ground.

The captain took a careful bead over McGarrity's shoulder and gently pressed the trigger. The leading—spider?—shuddered under the impact. Its soft bloated body sloughed together like a punctured sack. It fell, and hung suspended from the silvery strand spinning from its spinneret. Things were difficult to see and discern clearly in the livid gloom of the torch-shot forest. How many of these things were there, stalking forth from their dark hides?

McGarrity couldn't get down. The captain could see him struggling to free himself from the web. Twice more a rifle shot picked off encroaching death. "Keep it up, skip!" yelled the doctor from below. Sam echoed: "Keep 'em off till we can get McGarrity."

The captain didn't dare look down. He sighted again and shot coolly. This was work he understood. He was doing a job of work protecting his men. Lenson had moved forward in his tree—the whole thing had suddenly gone statuesque.

Then Lenson saw what the captain saw too late. The spider, crawling from the shadow of the trunk, paralysing stinger outstretched, jerking forward one leg at a time, delicate, twitching, feeling . . . Lenson jumped.

The captain saw McGarrity's body plastered against the sticky web; saw the spider enormous above him; saw Lenson's outward plunge that smashed his own body into the spider.

The three bodies fell. Flung from the strands by the violent reciprocal shuddering of the web—the whole network was shimmering and humming and vibrating—the three bodies plummeted down. The spider flung out a foaming mass of web-material, drawn so fast from its body that it vomited out organs and blood and all.

The captain slung his rifle and fell scrabbling from the tree, tearing strips of skin away, feeling finger nails rip and yet not feeling pain at all. He hit the ground and started running.

The doctor and Sam were bending over Lenson and McGarrity.

Torchlight pooled under the trees. The web sang high and keen to itself. A tiny breeze rustled leaves furtively.

"They're dead," the doctor said. "Both of them."

The captain straightened up. Sam shone his torch beam upwards, into the web. Beyond this there were others, spread-eagled among the trees. Flying things had been trapped here and there and dotted the shining circles like flicked mud. The spiders were cat-walking back to their crannies of darkness.

The captain lifted his rifle, sighted upwards — and then slackened his whitened forefinger, lowered the rifle.

"It's their world," he said. "Killing one or two in revenge is meaningless."

"Shep's okay," the doctor said softly. "Drugged by the venom. But he'll live." He had peeled back the wrappings from Shepkin's face. "The bindings broke his fall."

Sam was shaking all over now; the captain could hear his teeth rattle. "Damned reptiles," Sam said. "Not real spiders; couldn't exist that size. Damned toads. Now we know what that little beastie of Shep's tail was for."

"Sam," said the captain sharply. "Carry Lenson down to the car. Doc—take McGarrity. I'll bring Shep."

The three men from Earth carried their dead and their wounded back to the car and then, silently, to the spaceship.

Behind them the forest slumbered on in its murderous sleep.

Spades made loud, cheerful, full throated sounds. The ring of steel against alien rock was indecently jocular.

"Dip deep," said the captain. "They should rest undisturbed."

Presently the three men—the captain, the doctor and the airman—stood, caps in hand, around the two piles of rocks. Spot welded duralumin crosses caught the first flush of dawn light and glowed milky and green before the rose tint reached down to the earth from the remote sky. Only—it wasn't earth.

The captain said what it was necessary to say. They put their caps back on.

"We blast off now." The captain looked slowly around on the alien landscape under the rising alien sun. "This is a good world. Men will come here and live in peace and plenty."

"Will they ever think of these two men of the Terran Survey Corps who by their blood made this planet their own?" asked the doctor. He didn't expect an answer.

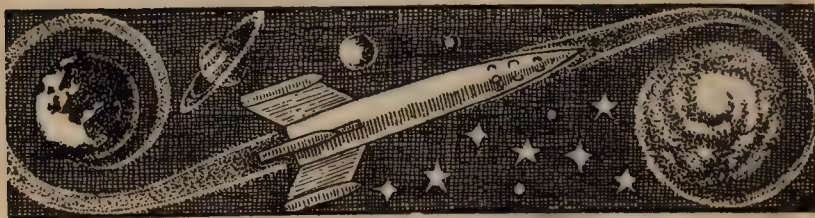
The captain did not try to reply. He said: "Life goes on in a rushing helter-skelter, and there is no time to look back, in sorrow or in anger, when you live among the stars." He sifted the regulation bottle—full of dust, putting it safely in his pocket. "Like McGarrity always said: 'Always the misbegotten job.' And, like Lenson was a little steamed up about: 'We must push the Terran frontiers ever outwards.'" The captain turned away to their spaceship. "Let's go."

Sam put one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. Deliberately, he spat upon the ground.

"Lousy, stinking planet," he said.

But they all knew who was right.

KENNETH BULMER



The World He Left Behind Him

He had known deep contentment on this world of idyllic happiness but now, alas, the time had come for him to go

Illustration by Kenneth Barr

They had certainly gone out of their way to be very kind to him, here in this other world of warmth and lazy content. But Jeff Matthews was beginning to sense that perhaps he had overstayed his welcome.

Perhaps, he thought, the time had come for him to seek the Gateway, if he could find it again, and at last return to the New York of 1963—if indeed the Gateway could restore him to his own world.

Matthews lay sprawled out, near-naked, on the golden-yellow sands of Murrival Beach, soaking up the warm sunlight. He was giving careful thought to an unpleasant idea: the idea that he might not be wanted here.

It was a painful thing to have to admit to one's self. But undeniably it was so. There was no specific instance of hostility Matthews could point to, but in his three weeks in this other world he had become sensitive to subtle shades of meaning that once would have passed him by, and he could detect the veiled implications in the words of his new friends.

They seemed to be telling him, *Go back home. You've been here long enough.*

Matthews drowsed on a limb of a sandy, angular peninsula that jutted out into the sparkling sea. A cool breeze rippled down out of the northwest, picking up a bit of chill salt spray and hurling it over him. Matthews grinned and sat up, and there was Corilee standing ten feet away, a grinning imp with arms akimbo, head thrown back, laughing at him.

"What's the joke?" he asked her.

"It was the way you looked when the water hit you!" she cried impulsively. "You were so funny!"

Matthews smiled and flicked the sea water from his chin. He was tanning rapidly in the world he still thought of as World X, and he felt healthier than he had ever been in his life. He was twenty-nine, a shade over medium in height and just a bit on the spindly side, and in the world on the other focus of the Gateway he had been—the concept was dimming already—an electronics engineer. Here no electronics existed, nor any engineers; neither was needed. The giant thermonuclear coil at Darien Bridge provided perpetual power for all the world. The heritage of their past kept these people happy. They were utterly liberated from the toils of routine life.

Matthews said to the girl, "Where are the others?"

"Coming soon. They've caught some sort of big fish, and we're going to have a splendid feast. Where were you all day?"

Matthews self-consciously kicked up a shimmering tuft of sand with his bare foot.

"Alone," he said.

"Oh," said the girl quietly. She smiled, the quiet gleaming smile that served as Matthews' mental tag for Corilee's entire personality, and said no more. No more was necessary. Matthews had invoked the code of privacy; on Murrival Beach, it was assumed that a man spent time alone only when he had some important matter to settle within himself that did not concern others.

The sound of gay singing drifted over the dunes towards them. The others were coming, now—the seven closest friends Matthews had ever had, in all his life.

He had separated himself from them at dawnbreak, in order to be able to think through this thing in complete solitude. But the sacrifice of their company had turned out to be fruitless. He still had no answer, no way to guide his actions. And now the others were coming, to invite him to join their fun.

But how sincere was their invitation, he wondered? If he could read their minds, would he find lurking in them a fretful impatience, as if they were merely tolerating him politely until he decided to plunge back through the Gateway into the madness of his own world?

The thought of that world was like a discordant shriek. He brushed it away and stretched out his arms towards Corilee.

"Kiss. Before they come."

She looked at him strangely, and he knew she was wondering why he had bothered to add that second sentence. A kiss was a kiss, and what did it matter if the others were there? The people of Murrival Beach knew how to respect privacy, after all.

Matthews held her tight against him for a moment, this girl of a world that was not Earth nor any part of Earth's universe, and felt the warmth of her sun-darkened skin against his own. But there was a stiffness to her response. She was holding back. Matthews felt more deeply troubled than he had been before. Three weeks ago, when he had been fresh and newly minted into this world, she had held back nothing. But that had been while he was still a stranger here, and therefore welcome.

Overhead hung the lemon-yellow sun that looked like Earth's sun, in the blue, cloud-flecked sky that might have been Earth's sky on a perfect day. But here the Weather Control station in Port Farragut, somewhere to the north, ensured that every day would be a perfect day. And this world was not Earth.

Matthews saw the others coming over the dune now. Dawl and Glair were in the forefront, carrying slung between them an enormous glassy-eyed green fish. The rest trailed along behind, dancing and skipping through the sand.

Dawl shouted out in his booming basso, "We'll eat well to-night! Look, Jeff—it was a barehand catch!"

"Mirlin and Rodric hypnotized the beast as it swam," Glair added in confirmation. "Then Dawl and I plunged in and hauled it out. You should have been there, Jeff Matthews!"

"He was alone to-day," Corilee said.

The merriment stopped abruptly.

The seven of them stared at Matthews for a long embarrassed moment, as the deeper implications of Corilee's four words registered on them.

Matthews wanted to tell them, *Okay, you've won. I can take a hint. I'll go back to the place I came from. I won't impose my presence on you any more, okay?* That was what they wanted him to say, no doubt.

Instead, by way of breaking the sudden awkward silence, he said, "That's a lovely fish you've got there. What's its name?"

"Rainbow fish," Rodric said. At his gesture Dawl and Glair swung the heavy creature over, to show Matthews the delicate hues of the spectrum along the fish's underbelly. "See?"

"Lovely," Matthews said again.

"We'll eat well to-day," Dawl gloated. "Let's build the fire."

Like parts of a single machine, the seven of them fanned out over the beach area to find driftwood for the cooking fire. Though no one had directly asked him, Matthews too began to search for wood, head down and eyes studying the sand. Corilee trailed along behind him.

After a few paces Matthews found a gnarled brown branch protruding from the sand. He wrenched it free and showed it triumphantly to the girl, but she shook her head sadly.

"This is the wrong kind of wood, Jeff. It does not burn well."

Matthews took the branch from her and savagely jammed it back into the ground, kicking sand over it. He had tried to be helpful, and he had failed. His lips were tightly compressed, and he kept his face turned away from her so she would not see his pained expression. At that moment he was closer to hurling himself through the Gateway which hung, gray and opalescent, in the air somewhere along this beach, than he had been at any time in all his stay in World X up to now.

World X was what they had called it in those New York days so dimly remote, when Matthews had been an electronics engineer, in that other world where such words had any meaning.

The Gateway had had its own special name, too. Johnny Price, who had been the first person to test its strange properties, had dubbed it the Intercontinual Flux-Field Disruptor. Its invention, of course, had been strictly an accident.

The United States Air Force contract that their laboratory held had commissioned them to devise a generator for creating high-gauss magnetic fields. What the Air Force wanted high-gauss

magnetic fields for, Jeff Matthews did not know or care. The reason why was one item of data that the Air Force did not usually supply.

The specifications called for them to design an electronic field generator capable of operating in a field of ten million gauss; what Matthews and his fellow engineers built was a force-free toroidal magnet producing a self-balancing three-dimensional magnetic field—a field in the multi-million gauss range that had once been only a physicist's pipedream.

At least, they *thought* they had built a magnet. It took them a full year from the day the first sketches went down on paper, in the spring of 1962, to the day when the lab technicians tightened the last bolt on the finished model.

On paper, the magnet worked.

No one in the laboratory was quite sure what would happen once current was sent pulsing through it, though. A magnetic field of such intensity had never been artificially generated before.

Matthews was one of eleven engineers who were allowed to be present at the first tests of the new magnet. His own part in creating the device had been a small one. He hadn't come up with any of the major suggestions or made any of the important breakthroughs. He was simply just another engineer in the lab group. He was far from being the high-powered Edison or Steinmetz he had once pictured himself as growing up to become.

He had grown up to become a scientist, at any rate. But either the time for Edisons and Steinmetzes had passed, or, what was more likely, he simply didn't have what it took.

At 29, Jeff Matthews was a mediumly successful engineer who got his semi-annual raises when the time came for them, but who was invariably passed over when the laboratory director released the promotion lists. He was just another engineer, uncolourful and unspectacular. He did his job and collected his reasonably adequate salary, and lived by himself in a reasonably adequate three-room flat not far from the laboratory's Manhattan home.

Once, he had shared the apartment with a gray cat, but the animal had died of natural causes after a few years, and the emotional wrench of losing him had been so severe that Matthews had deliberately refrained from acquiring another pet and facing the possibility of loss again.

He had once had a fiancée, too, but for some reason he had never quite managed to agree with her on a number of the allegedly important matters of life. She had drifted out of his ken not long

after the death of the cat, and since then Matthews had grown accustomed to solitude, and almost found himself liking it.

He had, in truth, no particular reason for staying alive. This fact had never occurred to him until two seconds before the hand of Jimmy Ludwig, the lab supervisor, closed on the toggle switch that controlled the new magnet.

In that moment Matthews realized that he scarcely cared at all whether or not the device exploded and blew them all to their constituent molecules, as it might very well do. It was curious to discover that he had no fear of death. But Matthews did not enjoy making the discovery, because it also showed him that he had no great need of life.

Jimmy Ludwig's wiry hand jerked the switch down.

There was no explosion after all.

Meter needles surged upwards in a frenzy of little pulsations, and for an instant the lights in the big, bare, windowless laboratory room dimmed. Matthews watched with keen interest as a vaguely circular cloud issued from the magnet's core and billowed up until it formed an oval the height of a man, gray in colour and flecked with oddly undefinable splashes of other tones.

For a long moment no one in the room spoke.

Then Jimmy Ludwig's hoarse, puzzled voice was heard. "Damn—what do we have here?"

It was a good question. Magnetic fields, even fields of millions of gauss, are not supposed to be visible. The device had produced a result. But not, it appeared, the *right* result.

At that instant, a chain of events was forged that led Jeff Matthews from his first startled instant of surprise to the day when he sent himself plunging through the Gateway.

It began when Johnny Price, the short, husky engineer standing to the left of Matthews, stared for a moment at the gray oval that had been formed, dug a burned-out vacuum tube from a waste basket, and flipped it on a rising curve towards the field.

The tube did not fall to the other side. Nor was the tube consumed in a burst of flame. The tube simply vanished.

The next few days were days of furious activity for the engineers who worked in Laboratory 9. The whole wing of the building was immediately cordoned off and placed under top classification while they set about figuring out just what it was they had produced.

On the third day, someone had the happy idea of constructing

a periscope that could be pushed through the field. This suggestion came after someone else had already thrust a wooden yard-rule through up to the fifteen-inch mark, and had withdrawn it apparently unharmed.

The periscope was duly constructed—it was a lengthy aluminium tube with the proper arrangement of mirrors—and two gloved technicians, eyeing the gray oval field uneasily, propped the tube up in a sling harness that allowed one end to project some three feet into the field. That way, an observer would be able to peer through the eyepiece without actually coming into possibly dangerous physical contact with the tube.

It happened that Jeff Matthews was in the laboratory, standing near the eyepiece when the periscope was installed, and so he was the first to look into the tube—not out of any consuming curiosity, but simply because he was closest and felt *someone* ought to take a look.

He stared for a long minute. When he finally drew his head away from the tube, he was pale and puzzled-looking and unsettled.

He said in a quiet voice, "Hell, there's a whole *world* in there!"

There was. His single long glimpse had revealed to his bewildered eye a broad curving golden beach lapped by foamy blue-green waves.

There were people on the beach, not alien monsters but ordinary human beings, happy-looking, tanned men and women wearing the barest minimum of clothing.

They were gathered together, pointing towards the periscope with some interest, and evidently they were discussing the strange intrusion.

At first Matthews thought that he must be having delusions. But then he called someone else over, and the other man also saw the elysian scene.

"I don't believe it," he muttered.

"It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not," Matthews said. "It's *there*. We both saw it. Either you're having my delusions and I'm having yours, or else that place is really *there*."

It could not be argued away. The scene on the other side of the Gateway was no mere South Seas fantasy produced by Matthews' imagination. There *was* a beach on the other side of the strange field. There was a whole world there. As they watched, the bathers vanished rapidly from sight and night seemed to fall—but,

before long, the sun was rising again in that other world. This time, however, there were no bathers to be seen.

It was not long before the laboratory workers were terming it World X and they had constructed half a dozen various hypotheses to explain its presence.

The notion that Matthews liked best suggested that the sudden concentration of intense magnetic force had in some way ruptured the boundaries of the space-time continuum and had opened a gateway into some parallel world.

According to that theory, World X was nowhere in the real universe, but off in some cloudy pocket of might-have-been. The idea was an appealing one. It was tentatively adopted as the most reasonable explanation, in the absence of any less far-fetched theory.

The discovery raised certain problems. The Air Force had asked for a supermagnet, not for a parallel world. It was going to prove difficult to explain to the pennywise contract supervisors that the results that had been attained, while highly interesting in themselves, were not precisely the ones that had been ordered.

For that reason a tight security blanket was clamped around the discovery. No word of it was allowed to pass the confines of Laboratory 9. Not until every implication had been explored would any sort of report on the finding be issued.

And so, in the three days between the creation of the Gateway and the time when Jeff Matthews reached his decision and resigned from the human race of A.D. 1963, almost continuous study of the strange phenomenon went on. Steady observation of the Gateway showed that the people on the other side were staying away from it; occasionally a tanned form ran fleetingly past, but was lost from sight almost at once.

The idea, at first not even consciously recognized, grew in Matthews during the next two days. A periscope and various other things had gone through and had returned with no apparent harm. Why not a human being?

There was a world waiting on the other side of the Gateway. And he, Jeff Matthews, was—it was a depressing admission to make—so little bound to the world he inhabited that it wouldn't matter greatly to himself, or to anybody else, if he were to vanish permanently through the yawning Gateway.

Naturally he made no attempt to broach this suggestion officially. There were limits to the sort of experimentation a rather

conservative laboratory would or could condone, and beyond question his idea definitely passed any reasonable limits.

Besides, any request to the effect that a volunteer be allowed to go through the Gateway would, if it were taken at all seriously, have to work its way up the channels to Washington and back—and the answer, when it finally came, would almost certainly be *No*. Lives, particularly the lives of trained engineers, are not risked casually for experimental purposes in democratic societies, no matter how willing the volunteer may be.

So Matthews volunteered more privately. He simply fixed his resolve in his own mind, and stayed late at the laboratory on the third night.

After the others had left, and before the watchman had begun his rounds, Matthews let himself into Laboratory 9, where the gray oval field still hovered in the air as it had ever since the moment, a few days earlier in the week, when the field had first been switched on. Matthews brought with him a small tape recorder that he had borrowed from another lab section.

He set the reels going and dictated a brief last statement. He explained that he was going through the Gateway in the interests of science, and politely requested that the field be left on until he had a chance to return.

He intended only a short stay on the other side—a few hours, at the most. Just in case he never did come back, he cautiously added a word or two about the disposition of his few personal possessions, which he wanted sent to a married brother living in Louisiana.

When he had said all he cared to say, he switched the recorder off, reeled the tape back to the beginning, and attached a signed note to it asking that one of the laboratory officials should play the tape.

Then he took a deep breath and a final look around, climbed on a chair, and leapfrogged through the Gateway and into what he and the other engineers jokingly called World X.

There was no sensation of transition. It was a clean, even plunge that brought him down, not on the bare laboratory floor on the far side of the apparatus, but on soft warm sand.

Getting to his feet, Matthews looked back quickly and saw the Gateway still hovering behind him.

A soft deep voice said, "Hello. I'm Glair."

Matthews did not stop to wonder why he understood the

other's language. This was a world very much like Earth in many respects, and if it contained human beings it was reasonable, he thought, to find oneself understanding their language.

Matthews saw a man who seemed to be in his middle twenties, tall, sun-bronzed, with the long, flat, rippling muscles of a fine swimmer. He wore only a kind of twisted bright-coloured loincloth.

"I saw you come through the Gateway," the man who called himself Glair went on. "Are you all right, or do you want to be left alone?"

Dizzy, Matthews shook his head slowly from side to side. "No—stay here——"

"Very well. Will you mind if the others come over to have a look at you?"

"Of course not. I mean——"

But the others were coming anyway. They were big, handsome men and finely formed women, who were making their way over the shifting dunes to the place on the beach where Matthews had appeared. Superficially they all resembled each other. The other three men were each cleanly and powerfully built and tanned like Glair; the four women were only a trifle smaller, looking like sun-darkened sprites.

They formed a loose circle around Matthews, curious, responsive, unafraid. He found his own nameless fears of a moment before melting away.

He said boldly, "I'm Jeff Matthews—I'm from New York City, Earth, the year 1963. Tell me: do these things mean anything to you?"

A girl stepped forward, and a smile danced in her golden eyes. "This is Murrival Beach," she said. "The year is 761. Did you come through the Gateway?"

"Yes."

"We've watched the Gateway all day," the girl said. "First this thing came through"—she produced the blackened vacuum tube from a pouch at her hip—"and then a few minutes later that long metal tube, and then after that there were other things—and now you!" She smiled and added irrelevantly, "My name is Corilee."

Matthews nodded. She was a beautiful girl, reminding him in some ways of the half-forgotten girl he had once called his fiancée, reminding him in other ways of the sleek, graceful cat he had once loved. Any thought of an immediate return through the Gateway



died instantly. This new world held too much that he had to savour and experience, first.

Corilee introduced him to the others. The men, besides Glair, were named Dawl, Mirlin, and Rodric; the other three women—girls, really, or else ageless witches—called themselves Jirain, Torilid, Hastur. Odd names, oddly pronounced, but they clung in his memory.

The eight of them formed a sort of group, living together on the beach, fishing and playing and singing. In those first few hours in the other world it seemed to Matthews that there was little else in life for these people but singing and playing and fishing; later, he was to learn of the subtle texture of their emotional relationships, that gave depth and meaning to what otherwise would be idle and parasitic lives.

But that knowledge was to come later. Now, they surrounded him, giggling, and stripped away his clumsy 1963-clothes, leaving them strewn on the sand.

They half-dragged him down to the edge of the sea. For more than an hour they frolicked wildly in the water, and when that sport

palled the man named Rodric produced a loincloth for Matthews similar to the ones the others wore. It was an important symbolic act. In a silent, unspoken, unexpected way, Matthews realized, they had accepted him. The stranger from nowhere had become one of the Group.

He tried to ask questions about the world he had entered, but either his playmates knew surprisingly little or else they were choosing to conceal things from him.

They told him that the year was 761, but no one seemed to know or care what event it was from which the numbering stemmed. No mention was made of any part of the world but Murrival Beach, which apparently extended for hundreds of miles. It was as if the beach were the entire world—or, at least, the only part of the world that mattered to the Group.

The Group lived in a rambling, strangely-designed mushroom-shaped house several miles from the sea, and Rodric told him once that all the power that was needed to run the house came from a perpetual self-replenishing power coil located at a place called Darien Bridge—a coil which, Matthews learned by skilful questioning, provided thermonuclear power. It had been built “long ago,” when the world had been much different. But these people went close-mouthed when Matthews tried to elicit points of history from them.

Before long he realized that they simply did not know. Life for them began and ended on Murrival Beach in the year 761. Matthews stopped asking questions about other places and times.

And as he entered further into the life of the Group, during the next few weeks, he began to see why their thoughts were anchored so firmly in the present. The past, now deep in enfolding shadow, had been a time of troubles as well as of scientific development; the future, pegged on the achievements of the past, was changeless and serene, so why worry about it? All that remained was the present, eternally golden.

Matthews swam and fished and sang. His city-atrophied muscles swelled and hardened. His soot-clogged lungs drank in the winelike air. His skin blistered at first, reddened, then began to turn to bronze.

Corilee came to him as a lover. Not exclusively, of course—an exclusive monopoly of any person's emotions would be both obscene and unthinkable in such a society—but his emotional bond

with her was deeper than any he felt with any of the other members of the Group.

In the second week they migrated, leaving their home on the beach and heading southward a distance of some twenty miles. There, a new home waited unoccupied for them.

Matthews realized vaguely that in migrating he was leaving the Gateway somewhere behind him, but that mattered very little to him. When the time came for him to go back to his own world, he would probably be able to find it again. And if he failed—well, no loss. He was a member of the Group. New York, the lab, the so-called real world, all such things were faded and false memories beside the warm and undeniable reality of Corilee and the Group.

His perceptions heightened; his mind was keen, his eyes clear and sharp. He realized that for twenty-nine years he had been only half alive.

Gradually he resolved never to go back. He would remain here on the beach forever.

And simultaneously it became clear to him that staying here forever would be impossible. The Group did not really want him, not even Corilee. Small things told him that—a guarded half-rebuke, a hooded chill. They were merely being polite to him. Their code evidently dictated that strangers were to be accepted into the Group.

But they were waiting, however patiently, for him to go home.

The night they feasted on the rainbow-fish, Matthews decided to have it out with them. They sat, the eight of them and he, round a smouldering fire Mirlin and Jirain had built from the wood gathered by the others. The bony remnants of the great fish swung from the spit, and the smell of the succulent white meat still lingered in the air. Dawl was strumming a musical instrument of some strange kind, a contorted elbow-bent thing that seemed like a sort of distorted guitar, and he was singing a wordless harmonic melody to his own accompaniment. Matthews nestled next to Corilee, but to-night he took no comfort from her nearness.

In the silence that followed Dawl's intricate improvisation, Matthews looked up and said loudly, "I would like to speak."

Eight heads inclined interestedly towards him. Matthews felt his stomach churning tensely. These people were so polite, so good, and yet what he had to say amounted virtually to an accusation of rudeness veiled by outward civility.

He hardly knew how to begin.

The silence grew and became almost embarrassing. At length Matthews burst out with: "You've all been very good to me. I came to you as a stranger, from another place, with different ways—and you've taken me right into your midst."

"We believe in kindness to strangers," Rodric said agreeably. "When you appeared on the beach, what else could we have done but offer you friendship?"

"But you *haven't*, really!" Matthews blurted out. He sensed disturbed uneasiness growing among them. "You've let me join the Group, sure, and you treat me as an equal. But—I'm going to speak bluntly now—I've gotten to feel that you're all marking time with me. Waiting for me to go back where I came from. You're all too damned polite to come out and say it, but you're hinting at it. You don't want me here!"

"We are very fond of you," Glair said mildly.

"We all love you deeply," Torilid added in a soft tone.

"But you all want me to go home. Why don't you say it out loud? Say that you just don't want me around?"

As he spoke, Matthews realised bleakly that if he were wrong, if the symptoms he had thought he detected had all been imaginary, then he had just destroyed his place in the Group anyway. He had externalised an unpleasant emotion—and, in this placid society, one was supposed to refrain from making disturbing outbursts of the sort he was indulging in now.

But it was too late to take back the words. He could only forge ahead now.

He stared at eight darkened unhappy faces and said, "I liked it here. But I don't want to impose myself on you. I'll take the hint and go back through the Gateway to the place where I belong. I'll leave tonight. The Gateway is north of here, isn't it?"

Quietly Dawl said, "You misunderstand, Jeff. Our friendship for you is real. But there is danger for us in letting you stay here."

Hastur took up the explanation. "Others might come through the Gateway in search of you," she said. "And we might not like the others as well as you. Or perhaps we would find ourselves exposed to regular visitations—tourists, or even an army of conquest."

"So you see," Mirlin went on evenly, "we've been quietly hoping that you would decide to go back of your own free will, as

a kind of sacrifice for the good of the Group, and—and close the Gateway so no others can come through!”

A lump formed in Matthews' throat as he saw fully what an egocentric idiot he had been. The subtle ostracism had existed, all right. But it had not been aimed at him personally. They sincerely liked him, even wanted him as a member of the Group. But so long as the Gateway remained open, the entire beach way of life was in danger. He was the logical person to end that danger. By returning to his own world and shutting off the Gateway field, he could repay them for the three weeks of happiness he had shared with them.

His voice was husky as he said, “Now I understand. I'm—I'm sorry. I didn't realise that—that——” He moistened his lips. “I'll start north tonight. Back to the Gateway.”

The eight of them insisted on accompanying him on the northward journey, despite his protests. It took them four days and four nights to make the short trip, and on the fifth morning Matthews found himself once again facing the vague purplish hole in the air through which he had made his entrance to Murrival Beach.

They embraced him, one at a time, Glair first and Corilee last. Corilee's embrace was warmer than the rest, and longer-lasting, and it seemed to be as painful for her to let go as it was for him. But her eyes were dry as she smiled goodbye to him.

Matthews looked at them all, at Dawl and Glair and Mirlin and Rodric, Jirain and Torilid and Hastur and especially Corilee. Then he turned to face the Gateway.

It hung a foot above the surface of the sand. Matthews did not want to linger now that the time of departure had come. He took a last single breath of sea-salted air and hopped through.

He expected to find himself returned to the lab. He was anticipating the possible knee-jarring drop to the hard floor. He was also ready to accept the possibility of simply being dissolved and scattered into the void.

The one eventuality he was not prepared for was going through the Gateway and emerging, on the other side, still on Murrival Beach.

He had definitely remained on the beach. He had hopped forward some three feet on the sand, through and beyond the Gateway, but otherwise he did not appear to have travelled. Irrational joy welled up in him. He turned to offer his apologies, to say to them, *Sorry, I tried, but I guess I stay here after all!*

He was alone.

The wind blew scattering gusts of sand over the surface of the beach, and cream-white seabirds wheeled and shrieked raucously overhead. The Group had vanished. And so had the Gateway.

Matthews remained quite still for one numb moment, then knelt and picked up a handful of the warm sand and tossed it about in perplexity. The weather now seemed a trifle cooler, and it was undoubtedly later in the day than it had been before his leap. The sun was lower in the sky, and he could clearly see the rising crescent of the moon against the backdrop of darkening blue. He had begun his leap in mid-morning and now it was late afternoon.

Someone was coming towards him from below, from the edge of the sea. Matthews narrowed his eyes and saw that it was Glair. Glair was dressed now not in the purple loincloth he had worn that morning, but in a red one.

Matthews trotted forward to meet him.

He said to Glair, "Well, it didn't work. I'm still here. Where did everyone go?"

Glair's normal amiability seemed shaken for a moment. He frowned in blank surprise. Then he managed his old smile and said, "Hello. I'm afraid I don't know you."

"Don't know me?" Matthews repeated. "Glair, is this a joke?"

"You know my name!" Glair cried. "How is that?"

"Of course I know your name! I'm Jeff—don't tell me you've forgotten me?"

"Jeff?" Glair pronounced the word as if it were utterly alien to his tongue.

"Of course," Matthews persisted. "I went through the Gateway just now, but nothing seemed to happen. I'm still here on Murrival Beach in the year 761."

The polite smile slowly left Glair's face. He ran his tongue speculatively round the edges of his lips and finally said, "You are mistaken. This year is 758."

"But——"

Matthews stopped. A rush of confusing ideas burst upward through his brain. If this were really 758, then he could see why Glair didn't know him. But how could he have stepped through the Gateway and remained in World X, three years earlier than his point of departure, instead of returning to his own world and time? And why had the Gateway vanished?

He recalled words Corilee had spoken.

We've watched the Gateway all day. First this thing came through, and then a few minutes later that long metal tube, and then after that there were other things—and now you!

He hadn't paid close attention to her words. She had said the Group had watched these things happen all in the same day, within the span of an hour or two. But, thought Matthews with growing wonder, it had been three whole days between the time Johnny Price had flipped the vacuum tube through the Gateway and the moment Matthews himself had taken the plunge.

Three days—in an hour or two!

"You look troubled," Glair said. "Do you want to be alone?"

Matthews nodded. "Yes, yes, please. I—have to work out a few things for myself."

Glair trotted away. Matthews shut his eyes for a moment and tried to reason it out, wrestling with the strange concepts.

Three days had taken just an hour or so here.

Suppose, he asked himself, suppose World X really is a parallel world? Just like Earth in every respect, except that its time flows faster. What was 1963 in my world was perhaps 2500 in World X when I crossed the Gateway.

But time moves faster in World X than on Earth, and so I've returned to my own world at a much later point than when I left it. This isn't World X now—this is Earth, my own Earth! I've returned to my own world at roughly the place along its time-stream that World X had reached when my world was at the 1963 point——

His head began to ache. He saw that he had made a zigzag round trip: from 1963 in his own world to 2500 or so of the parallel world, and then back again across the Gateway, landing this time in A.D. 2500 or so of his own world. In a sense he had leaped across time and, instead of making a complete return, had gone only a fraction of the distance back to his own time.

And now that he had made the circuit across the gap and back, the Gateway was gone. In this world, it had long since been shut off.

In World X, now irretrievable on the other side of the time-flow, the year 761 was long gone, the strange visitor long forgotten. But here the time had not yet come. He was new here. Perhaps his explanation was all wrong. It did not matter.

Only one thing mattered. He was back in his own world but not in his own time. He was in the era when happy beings lived on Murrival Beach, somewhere in his own future.

Matthews jogged over to where Glair was standing and said, "I think I owe you an apology. I assumed you knew me. But you really don't know me, Glair. Not yet, anyway." Matthews chuckled.

Confusion darkened Glair's face. "I'm afraid I don't follow what you mean."

"Of course you don't. But I'll explain everything, I promise."

Matthews took a deep breath of the tangy, exhilarating air. He stopped worrying about the true nature of the complex criss-cross in time and space he had executed. It would take a first-rate thinker to unravel the skein, and he had never been a first-rate thinker. All that counted was that he had looped outward in time and now the Gateway no longer existed as a threat to the beach people. He could win their friendship a second time. Now they would not subtly force him to leave.

"The others in the Group," Matthews said to Glair. "Where are they?"

"At the edge of the sea, where the waves break. Some are swimming."

"And is Corilee there?"

Glair looked more puzzled than ever. "Yes."

"And Dawl, and Mirlin, and Rodric? Jirain, Torilid, Hastur?"

"You know all our names. I wish——"

"I'll explain later," Matthews promised. He grinned cheerfully at Glair, feeling an upwelling happiness that was impossible to express. He had been reprieved. He had been given a second chance. He had returned to the world he left behind him, and it had become the world he wanted.

He started to sprint over the dunes down to the sea, to the place where the waves broke, where the Group swam. To Corilee. She did not know him yet. But now there was plenty of time for them to get acquainted all over again.

The Return

The little creatures on the nearby planet made good hunting—but closer contact had been strictly forbidden

Illustration by John J. Greengrass

*“ . . . you have committed the unforgivable sin . . .
regrets . . . licence revoked . . . unforgivable sin . . .
unforgivable sin . . . ”*

He came out of the blackness after what had seemed millennia . . . and the voice was still there! Not so shrill perhaps, not even so loud, but still hammering at his brain with the solid persistence of a pile-driver; still filling his head with a fury of sound. A sentence of death . . . a living death . . . or something that was worse than death!

He groaned and opened his eyes slowly. When they had adjusted themselves to his surroundings he had some initial difficulty in recognising the room in which he lay—he was, indeed, surprised that he should be in a room. He had to smile when he realised that he was home—and then everything was all right.

“Hello there!”

"Hi!"

He lifted a tired limb and immediately felt her touch. She was there, of course . . . she would always be there, whenever she was most needed. A comfort without equal. Already the other voice was beginning to recede; the trip-hammers had slowed down in his head and he was rapidly regaining possession of all his faculties. Some time would have to pass, he knew, before he would be himself again but at least the process of returning to normal had begun to take its course.

"Here, drink this." A container was pushed into his hand. He grimaced, knowing what was in it. It wasn't the first time he had had a hangover. "Go on!" she ordered. He could smell the nearness of her, her perfume, that he had learned to recognise and love so well. He drank down the concoction without a word and made another face as it seemed to eat its way down his throat. It was quite another two minutes before he could be sure he would not be sick.

"Home is the hunter," she said in a tight little voice that had obviously been meant to convey some degree of cheerfulness to the proceedings and had not succeeded.

"How long was it this time?" he asked.

"Five days."

"Hell!" He sat up in bed, surprised that he could still balance his head on his shoulders and, in spite of the ache and the still-clinging nausea, finally swung round until his feet were on the floor. "Were you at the spaceport to meet me when we landed?"

"I got there a little late. They told me you'd gone up to headquarters. I waited for you but when you didn't show up I came home. I've been here ever since."

"You—you know about it?"

She nodded. There was a suspicion of tears in her green eyes. "Some. But I can't say I'm sorry."

"But you know how I—I——" He could not finish. How many times in the past had he tried to explain the feelings of a man on the Hunt. It wasn't only the bounty paid by the company . . . it was . . . it was . . . Well, how did one explain it?

"I understand." She gave his hand a squeeze and took the glass from him. He stared as she did it. He had forgotten all about it.

"Who found me?"

"You found yourself apparently." She stood up and walked across the room to the dresser. He watched with admiring eyes.



She had a way of walking that was all her own; as though the air was composed of cotton wool and she had to push against it to get along. This was his wife. The most beautiful woman on the planet—in the whole darn solar system.

"What a fool I am," he said, speaking mostly to himself. "I spend more than a year away from home and then, when I finally do make planetfall, it takes me five days to get around to coming home to a woman like you."

She seemed to sway and the glass fell from her hands to the floor. It smashed to a hundred little pieces on the hard plastic.

"You all right?" he queried.

"Don't get up." She restrained him with a wave of the hand. "I guess you could say that I'm happy. I'll have you with me for always now."

He swore. "You know what this means to me?"

"It isn't entirely on your account that I'm happy," she went on. "Do we have to go on hunting those poor creatures as though they were wild animals?"

He sighed. They had been through it all before. A question

of economics in the first place he had told her. This planet was about played out; it would be time to move house soon, probably within the next two hundred years. In the meantime . . .

" . . . we've always been a race of hunters. And who'd have thought that such game could exist in the same system? Only fifty million miles away . . . killing two birds with one stone . . . mixing business with pleasure. And with a bounty on each head . . ."

"Poor savages!" she would say.

"They may be savages now," he had told her. "But believe me there's plenty of evidence on that little ball to indicate that theirs was once a flourishing civilisation. Why, they look so much like us they might be our ancestors—or our descendants, in spite of their funny shaped heads and their physique and the fact that they don't have as many fingers as we have . . ."

"Isn't there room for both races?"

"We could never live together. It's the survival of the fittest."

"And how long . . ."

"They'll last another hundred and fifty years. We'll have plenty of sport before they are exterminated and we can really take over."

"How long have I been home?" he asked presently.

"About ten hours. You've been practically dead since then—except for an occasional groan and some delirium concerning—a voice."

"The voice of doom. I'm all washed up. Do you know what I did?"

She nodded. "What they call the unforgivable sin?"

"Yes." He rubbed his eyes. "Do you want to hear about it?"

"Not particularly. Was—was she beautiful?"

"I don't know. I was drunk—and a long way from home. I thought you didn't want to hear about it?"

"They aren't so different, are they?" The expression on her face was almost a sneer. "They don't take any chances, do they? Don't mix the blood. Kill them, kill as many as you can, but for pity's sake don't make love to them . . ."

"Look . . ." he began.

"Don't worry." She bent down and started to retrieve the scattered shards. "I'm not going to cry. At least it has brought you home for good. I never thought you would break that rule but I'm glad you did."

He looked around him. "This is going to take some getting used to."

"So I can imagine. What are you going to do?"

"I don't really know." He brightened perceptibly and could only put it down to the fact that he was relieved at the way she had taken it. "Maybe I can get a job with the Canal Board." He stretched his arms. "We won't live to see it, but, you know, when the move does take place, there's going to be considerable joy at not having to build canals . . ."

She suddenly cried out with pain and he was at her side in an instant.

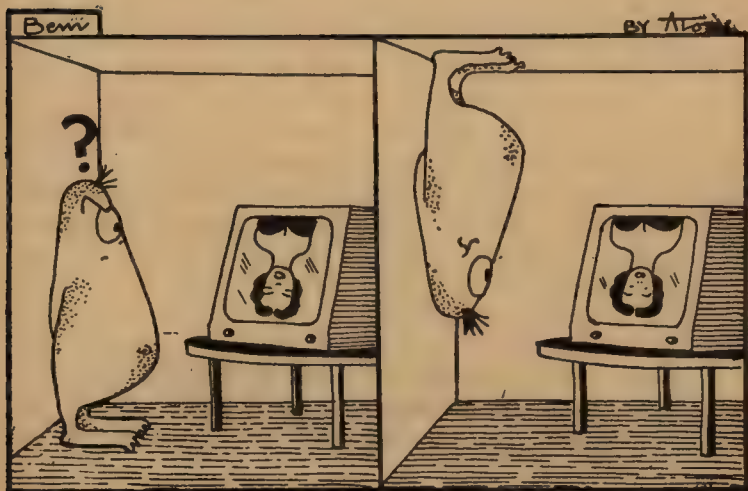
"What is it?"

"I've cut myself on the glass."

She held up a six-fingered hand and he could see the bright green blood dripping to the floor. A sudden wave of tenderness came over him and he took her in his arms. They kissed and then, within seconds, were laughing . . .

Outside, the twin moons of Mars looked down on a dying world of hunters.

MARK PATRICK



The Lieutenant

*This vile and evil life-form which would conquer
Earth was capable of actions unthinkable to man*

Illustration by John J. Greengrass

The lieutenant enjoyed commanding. Without any hesitation, he gathered up the fifteen men who were left into a squad, saw that they were armed with the nuclear weapons lying scattered in the area, and then addressed them.

"As you men must realise, the general situation is desperate. Our particular situation, however, can be improved. This part of England must now be regarded as enemy territory, and it is up to us to get out of it as soon as possible. We shall take two abandoned trucks and move roughly West, towards Stow-on-the-Wold and the Cotswold defences. The sooner we start the better; I want us to be well on our way before dark. Rations will be eaten on the move. I shall ride in the front truck, Corporal Bow will ride in the other."

Corporal Bow was a stocky man with spectacles and a Geordie accent. He looked hard and resourceful. Although no more than twenty-three, his rare smile revealed two rows of almost whimsically

false teeth. Apart from him and the lieutenant, all the other men were infantry privates, most of them very young.

Without fuss, the squad divided into two and climbed up into the 3-tonners. The lieutenant watched them professionally, judging their morale. Some of these men had actually faced the enemy. They spoke little now, but gave no sign of apprehension. One of them called out "Tickets please" as his mates climbed aboard.

Love and pride rose in the lieutenant. He did not analyse these emotions, beyond knowing that they made him happy by rendering him beyond fear—or at least beyond cowardice. Still in his late twenties, he was full of that idealism which the Army either fosters strongly or stamps out entirely. Glancing at his watch, he saw it was 5.30. The month was September; in an hour it would be growing dark. He allowed himself to dwell briefly on the coming midnight, when he would halt the trucks; in his mind's eye he saw himself directing the men to comfortable houses to sleep, while he sat studying a map by torchlight, finally rolling himself in a blanket to sleep on the floor of one of the trucks.

Putting this sentimental vision of service away, clapping his map case cheerfully against his leg, the lieutenant walked round to speak to the driver of the rear truck.

"Keep us always in sight," he ordered. "If you wish to attract our attention, use your horn. Remember, at any sign of the enemy we shall stop at once; so don't run into us."

As he went round to the front of his own truck, he called into the back of it, "Everyone comfortable in there?" and received cries of assent.

"Alright!" he said, swinging himself up beside his driver, "let her roll!" The phrase was—inwardly he admitted it—a concession to the drama of the situation.

The driver, a dark, gipsyish little fellow with a wreath tattooed on his wrist, kept his eyes on the road ahead and did not speak for half an hour. The two trucks moved down the deserted highroads steadily, reassuringly, the rear one always keeping the other's tail-board in sight. Soothed by their progress, the lieutenant relaxed a little. As his mind shifted from the clear path of duty, he began to worry over small things he could less easily deal with. Even the driver's silence began to trouble him; he liked to feel in rapport with his men.

Beyond the window, evidences of the enemy's depredations accumulated. Sometimes their guide lines lay coiled by the side of

the road, or entangled in trees, or stretched for miles across the dulling countryside. As they turned onto the A41, a village confronted them which had been almost consumed by fire. Parts of it still smouldered; a small band of men ran behind a smoking wall as the lorries appeared. Presumably the place had begun to burn in a panic caused by the invaders.

"Nice smell here—supper cooking, I wouldn't wonder," the driver grunted to the lieutenant a little later when they passed a small hamlet. This was his oblique way of referring to the stench of human corruption, suddenly so strong it nearly curdled the air. Slowing his truck, the driver leant out of his window, looking for bodies.

They saw enemy bodies too, disintegrating rapidly. At one small town they made a detour through side roads, the main road being completely under the enemy's netting. At other points along the route they met human survivors, walking, listlessly waiting, thumbing a lift. Some villages were unharmed, some completely unaltered except for barricades at windows and doors. Everything emphasised the randomness of the enemy's attack.

Evening drew in. The sun disappeared behind a hill. Darkness was like a positive quality radiated by the ground, a primitive thing opposing the senses.

"Shall I switch our lights on?" the driver asked; his voice was reluctant, even surly—though whether through habit, as the lieutenant suspected, or because he recognised in himself a dread of night, it would be hard to determine.

"Wait a bit longer," the lieutenant replied, and as he spoke they saw the enemy. The driver killed his engine; the truck stopped dead. Behind it, the other truck did the same.

Round the lieutenant's neck hung a pair of service binoculars. Opening his door, he stood with his feet inside the cab, and peered through the binoculars over the roof of the lorry.

The enemy were flying on a course that would eventually bring them across the road. There were fifteen of them by the lieutenant's count. They were high, in sunlight, the sun glinting on their retracted forward blades, glinting on the fifteen guide lines spread out behind them.

Removing the binoculars from his eyes, the lieutenant looked about him. The second truck was a few yards down the road, within shouting distance. Men in both trucks peered out to see why they had stopped.

"Can we have a shot at the blighters if they come nearer?" one of the men in the lieutenant's truck called to him.

"We will not bother them if they don't bother us," the lieutenant said.

Everyone watched in silence then, and the enemy sailed on in silence. As they got higher in the sky, they swerved in perfect unison, bodies glinting gold. The great arc they moved on took them eastwards. They dwindled, dulled as they lost the sun. In a minute more they were hidden from view by cloud.

Slowly the lieutenant climbed back into his seat, conscious of anticlimax.

"Move on?" the driver enquired. He got a nod for an answer.

Twilight was thick about them and their pace had dropped to a crawl as they entered Aylesbury. Glancing at his wrist watch, the lieutenant saw that they had made good progress. He decided abruptly on an alteration of plans, abandoning the idea of travelling on till midnight.

"We are going to turn off the main road," he announced. "This will be where we halt for the night. Go slow."

The driver grunted. Moving at a crawl, still without lights, they came on a left turn between neat semi-detached houses.

"Turn in here."

They swung round carefully, past an overturned and deserted milk van. The road curved until it ran parallel with the main road. Discreet little houses with their own gardens, shielded from the public gaze by shrubs and ornamental trees, stood on both sides of them.

"Good. Stop here," said the lieutenant.

Jumping down as soon as his driver braked, the lieutenant walked back to meet the second truck. In the first, the men were restless, and he told them to stay where they were. As the other vehicle drew up, Corporal Bow jumped out. He saluted.

"I have decided we will stay here for the night," the lieutenant said. "There seems to be some enemy activity, and our headlights might easily give us away. We should be able to find rations here without breaking into our own."

"Aylesbury ducklings," reminded the corporal. It was his only comment: the lieutenant had hoped for something more explicit in the way of approval.

"Everyone out of the trucks," he said sharply. "Fall in in

threes. Corporal Bow, take charge of the squad. I am going to see if this house is occupied."

The garden was trim, even prim. The garage had been hidden away behind trellis on which honeysuckle grew. An ornamental pool the size of a pudding basin lay in the lawn. Each side of the front door, concrete dwarfs stood cooly. Ignoring a luminous bell-push, the lieutenant tried the door. It was locked. He banged on it.

In the middle of the door was a long narrow panel of frosted glass. The lieutenant kicked it in, knocking the shards away with his side arm. A sense of power and elation filled him. Keeping the gun in one hand and a torch in the other, he squeezed through the middle of the door. Breathing rapidly he stood in the hall listening. Silence.

Everything was neat here. The sense of desertion, as the lieutenant moved from downstairs room to downstairs room, was complete : but the people had left without panic or fuss. Everything was beautifully tidy, even the ashtrays emptied.

The lieutenant, not an imaginative man, amused himself by visualising the owner of the house, the man who had built the ornamental pool, ushering his wife and children quietly and methodically out of the house. He must have said, "Better pack the kettle, darling," for no kettle now stood on the kitchen stove. The gas had been cut off, though the electric light still worked.

In the hall stood one suitcase. Opening it with eagerness, the lieutenant found only clothes, women's clothes over which he felt no interest. At the last minute, this suitcase must have proved too much, and had been left behind.

"Typical English family," the lieutenant muttered, feeling both love and contempt. He ought now to rejoin his squad, but the urge to explore was on him. Kicking the suitcase aside, he went upstairs. He used his torch, not switching on the overhead lights : that way was safe—and more dramatic.

The front bedroom, the bathroom with its toothbrushes gone from the chromium rack, were what he had expected. In one of the back bedrooms he found a dead woman.

She lay comfortably in bed with her jaw wide open, her mouth a hole into which the lieutenant did not care to shine his torch. From the evidence, she had been a chronic invalid; her age suggested she might have been the mother of the house owner. Medicine bottles and pill boxes were stacked on top of a tallboy. The paraphernalia of illness lay about the room : an invalid tray, spare pillows, a bed-

pan. And on a bedside table stood a bottle of sleeping pills, almost empty. The old lady had been too ill to travel; the family had taken care of her in the only possible way.

For some minutes the lieutenant stood there, his last muttered remark coming back to him. At length he went out of the room, closing the door behind him, and descended the stairs. Sliding sideways through the front door, he walked down the drive.

The squad was standing about on the pavement, talking and smoking with half a dozen civilians, men and women. When their officer appeared, they shuffled uneasily.

"Corporal Bow, what's going on here?"

As Bow came up, he ground the tip of a cigarette against the butt of his nuc-gun and slipped the unsmoked inch of it into a pocket.

"These folk live in this road, sir. They've not evacuated like the rest. They're staying on, sir. They were just putting us in the picture, like, sir."

"Alright, corporal. Fall your men in again."

As the men reluctantly formed up, the lieutenant counted them. One man was missing. At the last moment, he came running across from the other side of the road. With a sudden spurt of anger, the lieutenant discerned a woman in the shadows. Always women to interfere with soldiers' business! He was about to issue a reprimand when one of the civilians came over and interrupted.

"I understand you are about to install your men in this house here, lieutenant?"

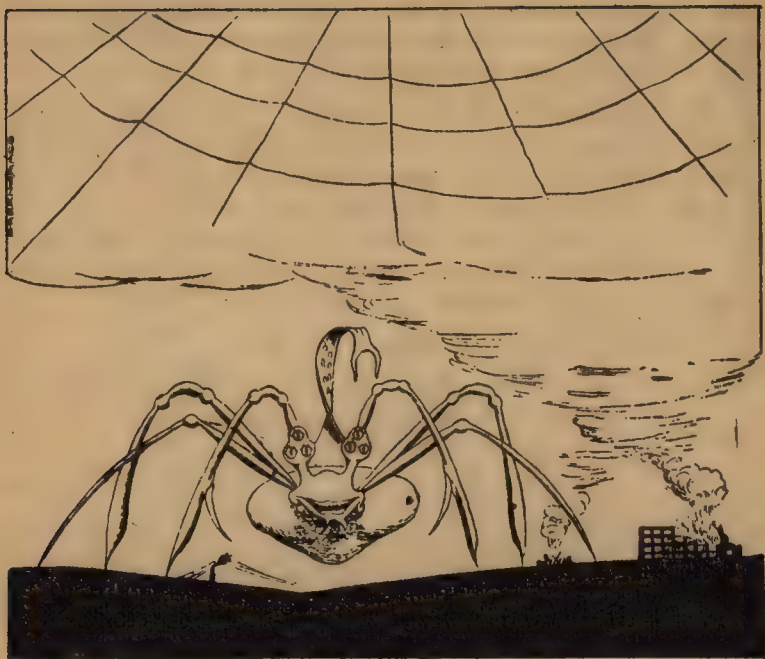
The speaker was a tall man in his sixties, wearing an overcoat and an oilskin hat which somehow failed to make him look ridiculous. He carried a sporting gun tucked comfortably under one arm.

"We shall be camping here for one night, yes," the lieutenant replied.

"My name is Ropeness, lieutenant. This house belongs to Ivor Merdock, and he has asked me to keep an eye on it for him while he is away. By law you have no right to enter it."

"The country is under military law now." The lieutenant's voice was absolutely adamant. Skilfully, Ropeness changed his tactics slightly.

"Nevertheless, sixteen men could do considerable damage to a small house, even in one night. Merdock was a friend of mine—I'd hate to see his place spoilt. Why not put yourself up at the



church hall, quarter of a mile down the road? They'll probably have blankets and a bit of food for you there."

"We're staying here, thank you," the lieutenant said sharply. "You might feel a little less solicitous for your friend if you knew he'd left the corpse of an old woman behind. He's a murderer, nothing more or less."

Dismissing the man, he turned back to his troops. Under his direction, they ran the trucks into the drive of Merdock's house and shut the ornamental white drive gates on which was printed the house name: 'Apres Midi'. A search in the empty garage revealed a ladder, which was secured across the gates to reinforce them. Two men were sent to reconnoitre in the back garden.

All the while, the little knot of people who still remained in the road stood outside, watching and discussing the matter in low voices. The lieutenant was surprised at the hatred he felt for civilians and their aimlessness. They seemed a more immediate threat to his men than did the enemy.

One sentry was posted in the front garden, one in the back. Everyone else went inside. When the curtains were drawn, the lieutenant allowed the light to be switched on. Grinning and joking,

the men climbed over armchairs and sofa, lighting cigarettes or poking in corners. One man peered into the coal bin.

"Shall I get us a fire, sir?"

"Do. Make yourselves as comfortable as possible." He saw he was already beginning to know their faces, to differentiate between them. He allowed himself to smile and one or two of them grinned back; all were curiously delighted by the contrast they offered to the domesticity about them.

"I shall sleep in the bedroom above this. The rest of you will sleep in here or in the diningroom next door. Make fires in each room—good ones, because you'll be short of blankets. Use the furniture if necessary."

This suggestion appealed to them. He must beware of turning the whole thing into an adventure. In colder tones, he gave them other instructions and then called for two volunteers to accompany him in search of food and information.

Two men stepped forward, a curly-haired Welshman called Davies and a bony lad with a cast in one eye who said his name was Hogg. Giving the corporal strict instructions to let nobody in or out, the lieutenant set off with his patrol.

Back on the main road, they turned a corner and were at once greeted with chaos. Peace and normality faded at the sight of six cars piled up together across the street. A light blazing from an empty window lit the scene, emphasising its ghastliness. There had been a stand-up battle with the enemy here. Human and alien corpses lay about the area. Furniture had been flung out of windows. A tank had ploughed through two gardens and now stood motionless against a smashed house wall. Over everything lay the nets and guide lines of the enemy, trailing across flower beds and roof tops indiscriminately.

"This happened not so long ago, I'll bet you," Davies observed. "The bloody bastards are beyond reason."

"Avoid the guide lines and we can get round this way," the lieutenant said, taking the lead, happy to reflect that he was showing no emotion before his men.

As he skirted one of the crashed cars, Hogg grabbed his arm.

"Just look there!" he said in a constricted voice, pointing to the lighted window. They could see the ceiling of the room. Over it shadows moved, shadows here spindly, there bulky. Next minute, one of the enemy appeared at the window above them.

Its palps waved into the dark. With sudden agility, it heaved

itself up onto the sill. Its head or cephalic region was the size of a dustbin. Hardly hurrying, it stretched up tarsal claws and dragged itself up onto the roof. Its body was the size of a bath. For a moment the watchers saw it outlined against the peak of the roof; then it disappeared.

"God, man, why didn't we shoot the filthy thing?" Davies enquired.

"Better to let it go; shooting might only attract others," the lieutenant said. His mouth had gone dry, he wanted a drink; but he kept his voice level.

An hour later, they had most of what they wanted. The centre of the town was empty of people, though doubtless a few still crouched in barricaded houses. Enemy nets lay thickly everywhere; the sounds of the enemy and the choking smell of them gave the night air menace. The lieutenant felt a vague alarm to think how carelessly he had chosen to camp so near to danger.

Several shops had been broken into by looters. They found an unopened general store in a side street. Davies charged the door. At his second thrust, they heard the side lip of the lock break from the wood, and the door opened. Closing it, they worked by shielded torchlight. The place was piled with tinned goods.

"We ought to carry as much of this stuff as we can," the lieutenant said, in sudden excess of greed. "Food may be short at Stow H.Q. Hogg, have a look round the side and see if you can find a cart or barrow of some sort."

Unlocking a side door behind the counter, Hogg found himself in a back yard. Masking his torch with his fingers, he saw the end of a shed ahead. It was open to one side. On rounding the corner, he tripped and stumbled over something. It was a guide line, no thicker than a piece of thin string but infinitely stronger, and sticky.

Hogg jumped quickly to his feet. At the same time he saw the great net in the shed. From the black centre of it gleamed the six eyes of an enemy. The eyes were coming forward, shining salmon pink. Hogg was very frightened.

Even as he raised his nuc-gun, he heard a scuttling behind him. He turned, saw nothing. Down, springing down, sailing down from the roof came an enemy, knifed legs gleaming. Hogg whirled back to the thing in the shed, fired hastily, fired again. As he fired a third time, big poisonous fangs sank into his shoulder.

Dropping their provisions, the lieutenant and Davies ran

through the shop and into the yard. With a twist of line around him, Hogg was being hoisted up to the chimneys.

As they tramped back to 'Apres Midi' with sacks of supplies over their shoulders, Davies said angrily, "If only they weren't just insects, spiders, you wouldn't mind so much. It's terrible to think we're being overrun just by spiders."

The lieutenant was silent for a second, organising what he had to say.

"They've been so lucky on this planet, Davies," he answered. "The egg-clutch that drifted here was lucky to land in a warm and desolate bit of Africa. Then look at the way they can multiply! They have no natural enemies here except man—one bite from their jaws can fell a tiger. They've evidently come from a planet bathed in hard radiation from its sun, because their tolerance is much higher than ours. They can't be indiscriminately H-bombed because they're too dispersed. Every factor's on their side."

"Well it's terrible to think we're being overrun just by spiders."

Irritated by the repetition of this remark, the lieutenant said, "They aren't really spiders, though they often act and look like spiders. They have lungs and a circulatory system like ours. If they have no actual intelligence, their instinct is of a very high order."

"I know, sir, but it's terrible to think we should be overrun just by spiders!"

The lieutenant lapsed into silence. Davies in all his stupidity was right. Davies had hit the nail bang on the head. Not only was it a bitter blow to have civilization threatened, but the enemy itself was an unknowable and unaccountable natural machine, more frightening than the most formidable intelligence.

They arrived at 'Apres Midi'. The civilians had disappeared. The elderly corpse from upstairs had been heaved over the hedge into the next door garden. Merdock's house downstairs was a shambles. The men, prompted by some unknown malice, had ruined all the rooms. The furniture had been broken up into firewood; the carpets had been sliced up to make blankets; the pictures had been smashed; the walls were covered with names and obscene remarks. Viewing it all, the lieutenant was both shaken and pleased.

When a guard duty roster had been arranged and a meal eaten, the lieutenant ordered lights out and returned upstairs to sleep. He had the double bed so recently vacated by Mr. and Mrs. Merdock. Pleasurably he climbed beneath the sheets, leaving his boots on. His

last waking thought was a picture of himself in Buckingham Palace, living like a lord or a pig and shooting gigantic spiders from an upper window.

At two o'clock in the morning he was roused by Corporal Bow.

"Enemy outside, sir, lots of little 'uns the size of coal buckets. Shall we shoot them, sir?"

"I'll come down," the lieutenant said. He spoke kindly; he was pleased to be woken, so that he could demonstrate how easily he roused, how quickly he swung his legs out of bed.

All the men were roused downstairs, where gigantic fires still roared in the grates, demolishing chairs and sideboards. The dining-room smelt frowsty. They had switched the lights out; peering through the curtains, the lieutenant could see a certain amount of furtive and hunchbacked activity in the back garden. Thin moonlight glittered occasionally on a guide line.

"They're more versatile than any of our species of spider," the lieutenant observed. "They can hunt by day or night. And in an area like this they won't find much to feed on except. . . ."

"Can we have a pot at them, sir?" someone asked.

"It's safer to leave them alone. They're too small to break windows and get in and bother us. Have the guards come indoors? Good. This lot will have moved on by morning. Nothing to worry about. Guards continue duties inside, rest of you get your heads down again. They won't bother us if we don't bother them."

But as he returned upstairs his thoughts ran on. The arachnid race showed no desperate eagerness to attack man. Meanwhile, in its remorseless search for food, it was attacking everything else, from cattle to birds. Another few months and Earth's ecology would be seriously upset.

He lay on his bed without climbing into it. A scratching, slithering noise sounded overhead. The creatures were crawling over the house, scampering over the tiles. Reluctantly getting up, the lieutenant went into the back bedroom where he had discovered the dead woman and peered out of the window.

The dead woman peered in at him. Even as he jumped back in horror, she moved, banging her nose against the pane. Her torso was visible, glistening whitely as if in a frosty shroud. Again she tapped, like a summons to the petrified man inside. Seeming to grow taller, she loomed up in the window.

A small enemy climbed over her and disappeared.

That broke the spell. Sweating, the lieutenant forced himself forward again. He stared out past the dangling body. The enemy had retrieved the corpse from the next door garden. Now, having woven a cocoon round it, they were hauling it up onto the roof before devouring it. Without thinking, he opened the window and peered up past the dangling corpse. A row of palps and legs could be seen over the guttering of the roof, waving and beckoning like seaweed in a fierce current. The lieutenant slammed the window shut.

As he ran down the stairs he noticed detachedly that there was panic in his voice.

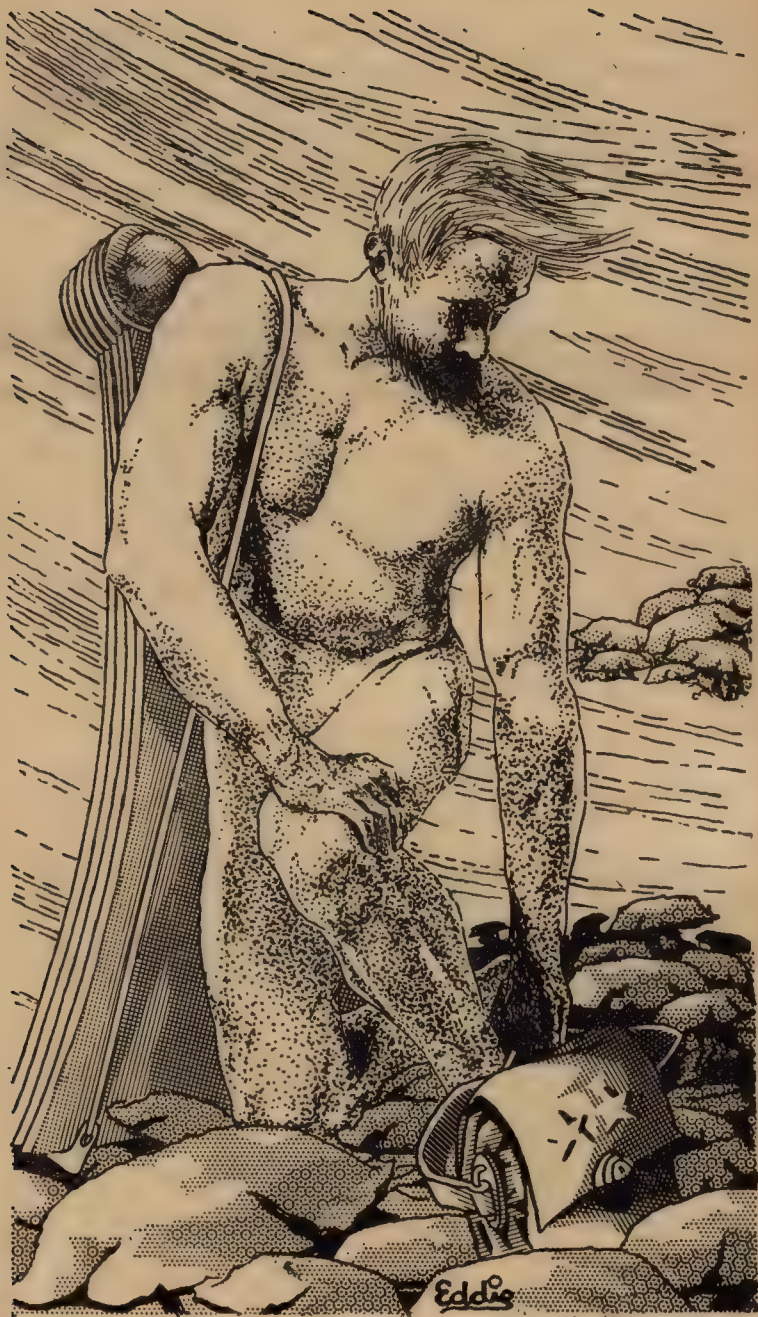
"Burn the house down!" he was shouting. "Set fire to everything! Burn the house down!"

BRIAN W. ALDISS

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Suicide Squad

It was an ugly and hostile planet which promised only death to men—or a life fuller and more fruitful

Illustrations by Eddie Jones

The skin between Whitmore's toes was the virulent mauve of gentian violet. Every time he pulled off a rotten shred it revealed the new tender skin underneath, already magenta coloured by fungal infection. His whole body was mottled in varying shades of pink and purple. He was naked from the feet upwards. The only reason he

was picking at his toes was because he had finished defoliating the dead skin off his torso and he had to do something to kill time while the hurricane blew itself elsewhere.

When the Beaufort dial registered Force Seven, which meant the wind had dropped to a moderate 35 miles per hour, he crawled out of his blister and stretched. Stretching was both a joy and an agony after several hours in the blister which was a shallow, light-alloy dome, eight feet in diameter and only two feet high at its apex. When most of the kinks were out of his spine, he made his way round the other domes and rapped a signal on each to rouse the occupants.

Including Whitmore, the camp numbered nineteen men all told. Discounting size, weight and age, there was a uniformity about them. All were naked. All had the permanent stoop that came from months of living in blisters and months of leaning into the wind—the wind which was never milder than a gale and was more often than not a blasting hurricane or a twisting tornado.

They had grown to talk little. Whitmore made his intentions known by deed. He uprooted the anchor pins of his blister and fanned the twelve segments of the shelter together to form a broad curved scimitar which he hung across his back by the chain mesh carrying strap. The others followed his example—except that two men left their folded blisters on the ground while they went across to Whitmore.

Bendix bawled into Whitmore's cupped ear. "You still want to drag the big one?" He filled out his words with a thumb jerk in the direction of the twenty-foot dome that housed the remains of their signalling equipment.

"We took it this far——" Whitmore mouthed.

Bendix shrugged to Lieberman and they made towards the dome. They thought Whitmore was crazy. Taking it in turns, the squad had dragged the dome through eighty miles of mud, bog and swamp against a perpetual wind that sometimes cut their progress to fractions of a mile per day, in a fitful light that was never brighter than olive green and with the heat and humidity making every breath a distinct physical effort. And for nothing. The communications equipment was next to useless.

Whitmore followed Bendix and Lieberman. He caught them before they had time to fold the dome and couple the generator to the half-track.

"Try for a fix before we move," he shouted.

Bendix looked defiant for a moment. "The Whip won't take

much more," he protested. "Fatigue is going to make it snap any time now. Besides, we heard nothing yesterday."

"Try it!"

Bendix shrugged again. He pulled aside one blade of the dome and crawled inside. Lieberman waited until the thirty foot antenna had detelescoped to its full height before following Bendix and starting the generator. Whitmore waited and anxiously watched the Whip snapping through the murky air.

"Nothing," Bendix announced when he reappeared. "They must be dead."

"Radar?" asked Whitmore.

"The bowl isn't fixed yet. You want to wait?"

Whitmore looked into the sky, which told him nothing, gave him no clue as to how long the temporary comparative calm would last. If they waited until the bowl antenna was repaired they might be halted for days by another hurricane. If they took advantage of the lull and forged ahead without a fix, they could be going in the wrong direction altogether. Either decision was bound to be the wrong one.

He shifted the neck strap of his blister to a less tender spot on his shoulder, slung the small satchel containing all his worldly goods over the other and picked up his energy rifle.

"Fold the dome," he yelled. "We're moving out."

Whitmore was the old man of the party. He looked it too. With nine months' growth of beard on his face it was hard to believe he was only thirty-three. It was just as hard to believe that his muscle-corded frame belonged to a man who had once been a desk-riding schoolmaster.

Back on Earth he had never thought of himself as a potential leader of men. Nor, for that matter, had his wife, Julie.

"Whit," she would say when she was on her favourite theme. "Have you put in for one of the new schools yet?"

"You know I haven't."

"You promised you would."

"I promised nothing. I said I would look into it. Which I did. And I decided I'll stick to being the kind of teacher I am, the kind of teacher I like to be—not a damned resident electrician to a staff of robotutors!"

"Do you like the kind of money you're making? You could get five times as much if you——"

"Julie, I admit I am tempted by the money. But not that way.

I don't like the principle of kids being fed their teaching by a mind-pump."

"Principle! That's all you have in all this wide, wide world. But can we eat principles? Can I take a fistful of your principles down to the stores when I want a new coat?"

He thought Julie was probably right. He was a shade overstrong on principles. Maybe that was why the squad had elected him leader when they had been cut off from the main army. The men knew he was too hidebound to be anything but just.

He wondered if they still thought the same, now that they had discovered the stubborn streak in him, the hard core of purpose which Julie had never suspected.

She gaped when he told her: "I'm joining the army."

Then she laughed in his face. "Which army, Whit?"

"Federated Space Security. They always want people."

"Boys, Whit. They want glory-chasing boys with stars in their eyes, not schoolmasters without any sense of adventure. Honest, Whit, I can't help laughing!"

"I mean it," he said. "I told you a lie just now when I said I was joining. I've already joined."

Julie's smile twisted into a little sneer. "And they took you? They must be hard up——"

"Maybe. It's a special branch. They can never get too many volunteers for this one. It isn't the usual policing of the inner planets. This branch operates much farther away."

Through a barrage of cross-talk he eventually got her told. That a foothold had been made on a planet of Polaris. That when he went, it would be for a long time. That he might even never get back.

"What about me?" Julie asked. "What do I live on while you're playing hero?" She paused, thought to herself, and went on: "It must pay well——"

It was his turn to smile. "It pays, Julie. But that wasn't why I joined. So I've made you a maximum allotment. And if I shouldn't come back, if anything should happen, there'll be a handsome pension for you."

Too late she discovered his stubbornness. Suddenly she did not want him to leave her. Suddenly his presence was worth more than his FSS pay. Whitmore had expected something like that to happen, had even hoped it would happen if only to show that she still had some feeling for him. And because he knew she would

probably have been able to talk him out of it, he had taken the irrevocable step first.

Afterwards, he often suspected that his real reason for joining was to dodge the recurrent question of applying for the deanship of a robot-school.

He called for a halt when they came to a wide pool, a small lake almost. They had been marching for two hours, alternately leaning into the wind and backing against it as it changed direction.

The pool had no definite edge. The ground beneath their feet had become increasingly more sodden, more muddy, more yielding. Ahead of them, the mud got thinner and thinner in consistency until it dissolved into an inky fluid. In the pool, they would find their next meal.

The planet was a world of fungi. Big fat saucer-topped fungi that stank. Small putrescent pimples of fungi that squelched under their feet. Tiny invisible fungi that threaded their mycelia under the skin to rot it and turn it purple. None of the fungi were edible. But in pools of water they had learned they could find weeds which looked like strips of leather, tasted like the rind of old cheese, yet were vigorously life sustaining.

Whitmore thought they were lucky to find the pool just where it was. They had marched about as far as they could without a rest; and the surrounding terrain was sufficiently flat to prevent them being surprised by an enemy attack. He elected Darro to collect the edible weed.

In another age Paddy Darro would have been a buccaneer. He was a little man, just inches outside the status of midget, but his size was the only little thing about him. His hair and beard met in a fierce black mask through which he stared at life belligerently. In his time he had been a circus acrobat; he still had the acquired litheness and agility; he was the fittest man in the squad. His courage was always on display.

Some of the others protested when it was their turn to gather the weed. Darro's reaction was the opposite. He flashed his teeth. It was a lousy, filthy job, not too dangerous but extremely unpleasant. He welcomed it as he welcomed any chance to pit his guts against nature.

The pool was not deep; they never were. The planet's aqueous component was in a state of constant equilibrium. In the distant past the lakes and the seas had boiled into the atmosphere until it

was saturated with water vapour. Since then it had never dried out and was incapable of holding more.

Darro waded out until the water of the pool was waist high. He paused to make sure he had an audience—an exhibitionist habit of his circus days—and dived under the surface.

As he detached the weed from its anchorage in the silt, it floated to the top. He made repeated dives until he had uprooted enough to feed the nineteen men. Then he swam to the side, pushing the floating larder before him.

Immediately he was on his feet, he was surrounded by willing helpers, their knives at the ready to scrape his body free of the submarine fungi which always swarmed to the food collector like predatory fish and anchored themselves to the skin by suckers and tendrils.

"Lookit!" he yelled. "D'you ever see so many!" He sounded pleased, as if the leech-like fungi were medals or badges of honour. Yet he let the others scrape him because he was not fool enough to let bravado kill him. Unless the fungi were removed quickly, their root-like mycelia could set up a lethal allergy. As it was, Darro was going to have a bad time for a few hours when his skin would boil up in angry blotches and peel itself off the tormented flesh underneath.

The weed was eaten raw. It was tough. Six inches of it, which made an average meal, took a solid hour of chewing. The men's teeth, as a result, were in better condition than they had ever been.

Whitmore sat beside Darro, asked him how he felt.

"D'you ever hear me complain, Whit? It'll pass."

Whitmore lapsed into silence. Somebody like Darro should have been leader, he thought. Then he realised that the little man's perpetual air of bravado was probably an irritation to the others, who did not know that it was nothing assumed but simply a natural part of Darro's make-up.

Darro had told him about it once.

"D'you think I'm a show-off, Whit? It's nothing like that, you know. It's something I can't help, something that is so strong it has shaped my whole life. I've got this urgency inside me, it's burning hot all the time. Always I've got to be aggressive, going out of my way to fight. And because I'm too little to fight people, I have to fight other things—nature, danger, the elements, or circumstances. D'you know I once went to sea? Thought it would hold plenty opportunity for—well, I suppose you would call it adventure.

It didn't. Everything was too mechanised, too perfect, too safe. Nothing could go wrong."

From the sea he had gone to the circus, still in his teens. Circus life had given him a lot of satisfaction, five years of it, until its challenges palled. The day came when he had done everything, met every challenge and beaten it, and the circus was finished for him. There were no more tricks to try on the trapeze, nothing that could excite him any more on the high wire.

He became a construction engineer, working eight and nine hundred feet above ground, erecting television transmitter masts.

"That was okay while it lasted," he told Whitmore. "Until the jobs ran out. They don't need any more masts. So I joined this outfit."

"How does it measure up? You couldn't hope for more to fight than we have on this planet."

"It's all right," Darro admitted. "But sometimes I wish I was different. More like you, for instance. You don't look like you had any compulsions, you've got nothing riding you. With your background, you were crazy to enlist. Steady job and steady pulse."

Whitmore surfaced out of his reminiscences. He turned to Darro and asked, "What made them pick me to lead the outfit?"

Darro pondered. "Probably because you were the oldest, I guess. And being a teacher, you're accustomed to giving orders, seeing that things are done in a regimented way. Maybe some of them regret it now. You know . . . the way you insist we keep on going even if we don't know where and don't know if we'll ever see Cummings and the rest again. But don't take that as a personal complaint—whatever it is, you say it, I'll do it."

Had it been any of the other men, Whitmore would probably have reiterated his reasons for going on. With Darro, no explanation was necessary. The little Irishman did not care why; if he did, he was astute enough to see that Whitmore had no alternative.

The ship was more than eighty miles behind them, somewhere. Exactly where, they no longer knew. But if they should ever get back to it, there was the comforting knowledge that it would be in a flight-worthy condition. Cummings had stressed the point when he called for their help: the ship must be sealed off against any enemy attack in their absence.

But Whitmore suspected they would never see the ship again. The odds were too high.

This was the fourth expeditionary force to the planet, the planet which for obvious and waggish reasons had been dubbed Espresso.

The first ship had been on a glory mission; its task was purely exploratory. Her ten-man crew had found the planet. They had signalled the news of their find back to Earth, a message which had been duly picked up four-and-a-half years later. That was the first and last signal from the crew.

When another six months had passed in silence, a second ship was sent. She was bigger, her crew numbered twenty. Her three-fold purpose was to follow the trail that had been blazed, find the other ship and ascertain what had happened to its crew, and to establish a foothold on the first habitable planet found outside the solar system.

This second ship fared even worse. From it came no signal at all. Last time she was heard from, she was almost four light-years from Earth. It was not known what had happened later; whether she had crashed on Espresso, or landed safely and suffered whatever fate overtook the first ship, or whether she was still boring into outer space, her target missed completely.

There was no giving up now. The planet was there to be conquered, and challenges are made to be accepted. Besides, there was a double mystery to clear up. A third ship was sent.

She took a task force of fifty men, each of them armed to the teeth.

She got there safely, boasted about her achievement and began to send a steady stream of signals.

She reported in detail on the peculiarities of the planet's atmosphere, even came up with an explanation. Outside the heavy sodden atmosphere, which had a pressure one-tenth more than Earth's, there was a moon. The moon was close, so close it must have been skirting round the rim of Roche's Limit. As it orbited, it dragged the atmosphere round in great tidal waves, causing eternal gales and hurricanes.

The crew, armed with energy weapons and pugnacity, had explored the planet. They found the second ship and reported that she had crashed.

Then the exploring parties failed to return. Others were sent to find them. Some they did find, dead and already too decomposed to determine the cause of death. But there were too many of them for the cause to have been natural. Another report came back to Earth: the planet must be inhabited and the natives—henceforth called the enemy—were hostile.

Dangerously depleted in numbers, the leader of the expedition signalled his intentions of returning. Pending his return with a full

report, he advised that the next ship should be of shallow, wind-resistant design and that she carry as many men as possible.

Whitmore belonged to that fourth ship, which was despatched when nothing more was forthcoming from its predecessor.

He asked Schultz and Lilly to get the Whip extended. The squad had rested as long as he dared allow them if any further progress was to be made before the next blow-up. The failure to contact Cummings last time was discouraging, but did not permit them to neglect trying again.

Schultz and Lilly were next in line for dragging the dome. Meanwhile, having erected the antenna, their job was done. Schultz and Lilly—like Margiotta, Hock and Newcastle—had enlisted purely as stores and equipment men who could also handle a rifle.

Only three men were qualified signals staff. They were Whitmore, Bendix and Lieberman. Darro and the remainder possessed only one talent; they were fighting men.

Whitmore crawled into the dome himself. He found the radio non-productive. For one more time in a long list of times he cursed Espresso and its atmosphere which made radio and radar so fickle. The planet had plenty of oxygen, so much so that wave-lengths in the one centimetre range were almost completely absorbed. Round about ten centimetres, signals were damped and obscured by countless diffuse echoes from the sweeping banks of cloud.

And the one and only way out of the problem was not open to use. Metre wavelengths and upwards would have been the answer. But they called for big aerials—and the wind put big aerials out of the question.

Whitmore gave up, disconnected the generator and hoped the real reason for Cummings' silence was not something worse than atmospheric conditions. When the dome had been folded into a quadrant, and the generator was hooked into the outrigged half-track, he led the squad on its way again.

His general education preparatory to becoming a teacher had included a working knowledge of geophysics. He had therefore been able to work out that the planet had the barest of axial tilts. Since they were somewhere near the equator and getting nearer, they marched in the heat of the local summer. Axial spin was slow and the days were long. One fact which he did not pass on to the others was that it was going to get hotter.

By his reckoning it was getting near the planet's midday and also near midsummer. He thought it was funny that the atmos-

phere which sapped their strength with its humidity was saving their lives at the same time. Without the atmosphere, the furnace heat of Polaris would have fried them.

His calculations were borne out when Schultz and Lilly cracked up an hour later. They did not have to tell him they could not go on. They were stretched in the mud, unconscious. He dug in their satchels, found their precious salt tablets and forced a half-dozen into each man.

"It's no use," Schultz said. "It's more than flesh and blood can stand. We've got to stop, Whit."

Lilly was slower in coming round and Whitmore had to ask Schultz to repeat what he had said. "Sorry," he apologised. "Lilly had me worried."

"It's too much, Whit. The half-track might just as well not be there. You've got to drag the dome sideways round the softer patches, heave it out of the mud all the time. If we have to go on, I vote we park the dome."

Whitmore's mouth was set stubbornly, and although he said he would think about it, his mind was already made up. He went to have a word with Bendix and Lieberman. They went into a huddle, shoulder to shoulder, arms around necks; proximity was the only sure way to carry on an extended conversation.

"We'll have to hole up a while," Whitmore said. "Schultz and Lilly are whacked. I could assign the next pair to the dome, but we'd still have to wait until Schultz and Lilly get their strength back. So long as we're going to be static, let's get some work done. How about the bowl? Could you fix it in—say, four hours?"

"Hard to tell," said Bendix. "We can try."

"You can try," Whitmore amended. "I want Lieberman to get on to that radio and stay with it until we leave or until he hears something."

They argued. Bendix said it was asking too much for one man to fix the damaged bowl. And Lieberman expressed his unhappiness at the prospect of four hours in the dome. The thing that neither of them said, although it must have been on their minds, was what was preventing Whitmore doing some of the work himself.

He answered the unspoken question. "I'm taking Darro on a scouting trip. Don't worry—we won't go far. But according to the last signal we got from Cummings, the main party can't be so very far away. I don't suppose they're close enough for us to find them. That would be fantastic luck. But we might find some sign of their passing this way."

He showed his understanding, the humanity which he dared not expose too often for fear of losing his grip on the men, by patting Lieberman's shoulder.

"Stick with it, Lover Boy!"

Sweat dripped from Lieberman's fingers as he kept moving the controls, doing everything he could to coordinate with the whipping antenna outside. And he kept thinking about Whitmore's parting words. Everybody else called him Lover Boy, but this was the first time from Whitmore, and from him it had sounded like a kindness.

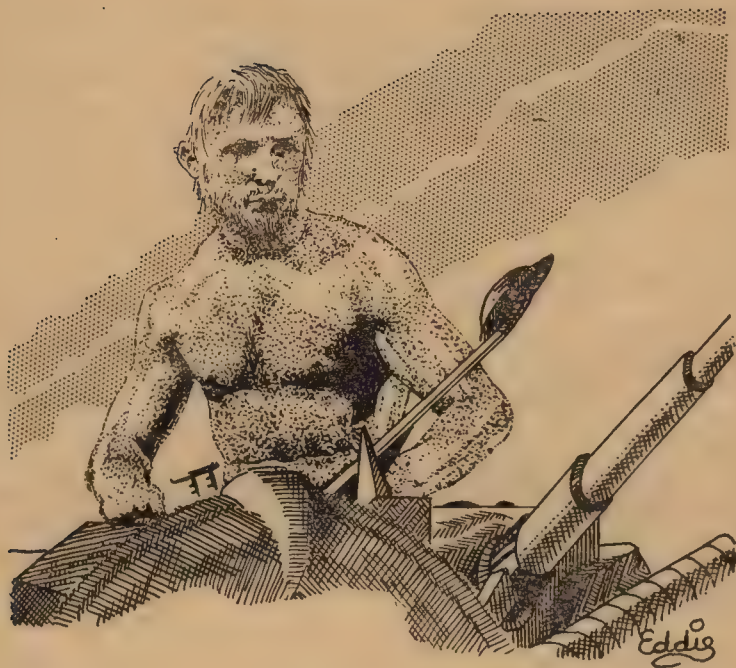
Lieberman was from Vienna. He was twenty-six, looked twenty and probably always would. His body had as many fungal blotches as any man's but by some freak of chance his face had not been affected. He often wished that it would.

He hated his face and its eternal youth. Even now, after months in the swamps of Espresso, it had a soft boyish look and his beard was a mere fringe, the sparsest beard in the squad. It was his baby face and a rough translation of his name that had earned him the title of Lover Boy.

Back home it had been the same. Everybody thought that because he looked so effeminately handsome he must be lacking in courage. Since the inception of his manhood he had had to prove himself over and over again, accepting silly foolhardy challenges just to show that he was indeed a man. Even to Greta who should have known better.

Greta had known him since childhood. Their fathers were professors at the same university. During their infancy and in their teens, they had been constant companions and Greta had seen nothing remarkably different about him. When he went on to the place in the university which his intelligence had earned him, she had congratulated him. It was only when the others began to use his nickname that she looked at him differently. As time went on and he remained a boy in features, she began to wonder. She began to tease him.

He took her teasing good-naturedly, secure in the knowledge that from childhood sweethearts they had grown into a betrothed couple in all but the public declaration. Then she too began to test him, to put dares in his face for him to answer. She chose a woman's way. And he, too blind to see the wile, was shocked. He had deep religious feelings; he refuted her dare by citing his convictions. For her, it went from a pretend dare to the real thing. Had she stopped



to think, she would have been shocked at herself. But she believed like all the others that he was lying, using his declared scruples as a mask for his inadequacy.

It was in a mood of dazed disbelief, with a sense of deep disillusionment, that he volunteered for the army of Federated Space Security.

He wiped the backs of his hands under his armpits. He had been a fool to let her shake him. Especially now. Especially now that he knew none of the others had meant any real malice. He wished Whitmore would come back to call him Lover Boy again.

Whitmore and Darro were taking no chances of getting lost. Every few steps they fired their E-guns at the ground, earmarking sudden cakes of mud which would stay dry for as long as they intended being away from the camp.

In spite of the wind, which seemed to be rising, their bodies glistened with sweat. The enervating humidity prevented evaporation. The sweat piled up on their skins as it oozed from every pore until its mass got too much for the surface tension which held it and

it slid down their thighs, coursed its way through the hairs on their legs and ran into the ground from their feet.

They did not talk. They kept close together so that neither would get out of touch with the other in the haze which could hide a man ten yards away. They conserved their energy for walking.

The information given in Cummings' last signal indicated that the main party was no more than five miles ahead. But four days had passed without another signal. Cummings' squad could have moved since then. Or they could be dead.

Fate was dealing the fourth expedition to Espresso pretty much the same hand it had given its predecessors.

Things had gone well at first. The ship was built to withstand the climate, nothing could go wrong there. In the initial weeks, devoted entirely to the collection of physical data, there had been no casualties. Then the first patrol was sent out.

Its strength was twenty men; sixteen trained fighting men, four signal experts to keep them in touch with the ship. Misfortune struck the patrol before it had gone a mile from the ship. Their signals dome had got bogged down. They put in a quick report and said they were trying to extricate the dome. Only minutes later they sent a second report, a panic call to the effect that one complete radio and radar unit was rapidly sinking in the mud.

Cummings—since this was technically an army he was titled General although nobody used the title—told them to sit tight. They were quite near. He had a fix on them. They were not to move until he sent a second patrol to bring them in.

Three men never returned. They had been killed while the stranded patrol waited to be rescued.

Nobody could give an exact account of what had happened. They swore one and all that they had kept close together. Yet when the time came for a roll-call before returning to the ship, three men did not answer to their names.

They were quickly found. And fear was seeded in the men when they realised that some of them must have been standing shoulder to shoulder with the victims as they had been struck down. The ferocity of the killings was food to the newly planted fear.

They had died by the knife. But the blade had not stopped at their death. They were slashed and carved, horribly mutilated, faces and bodies alike.

The mud around their bodies was too churned by many feet for any particular set of alien prints to be picked out. But no one doubted that the enemy had struck. The unseen enemy who had

killed the men of earlier expeditions. An enemy who slipped silently through the mists to do his killing and had slipped away again just as silently.

Cummings gave his men a day to recover. Then he sent the patrol out again, thirty men this time and each of them armed with a new alertness.

They were gone for a week, a week when the atmosphere displayed its full repertoire of tricks and communication was impossible. At the end of the week, one solitary man staggered into camp.

His name was Turaczek. He was a Polish fighting man who had never before shown fear—certainly not the terror which made him talk incoherently and twitch his face as he talked. Bit by bit, Cummings got his story, the story of what had happened during the week of radio silence.

As before, a man had again died suddenly and mysteriously. But on this occasion he was found while the blood still flowed from his body, before any mutilation had been done. On the assumption that the killer must be very close, half the party prowled in one direction, half in the other—with the understanding that each party was to turn back after an agreed limit of ten minutes.

If vision was impaired by the thick atmosphere, sound was not. The small sound of men's voices was drowned by the howl of the wind, but the sharp crack of an energy rifle was carried clearly by the moist air.

Turaczek's party had stopped when they heard the rattle of E-guns. They stopped, turned and slopped their way back, past their small camp and in the direction which the other party had taken.

Of the fifteen men, they found two. Nine lay dead, fried by E-fire. Four were missing, presumed dead. The survivors thought these four had been knifed by the aliens who had taken their guns and turned them against the others.

Even while Turaczek questioned the survivors, fierce bolts of energy crackled at his men from the mists. He told them to hug the mud.

The firing stopped, leaving only the howl of the wind.

They stayed immobile for hours, afraid to move, not knowing whether the enemy had departed or whether they waited for the Terrans to betray their position.

"I crawled along the ground," Turaczek said. "All the time I kept moving among them, telling them to keep quiet, encouraging

them, trying to cheer them. They were scared, General. I had made a few round trips before I noticed——”

He broke off and rolled his eyes. Cummings waited.

“They were getting less!” Turaczek’s voice held all the incredulity he must have experienced. “Each time I went along the line there were less of them. They couldn’t have slipped off; they were too scared to move. Somebody . . . something . . . must have sneaked up, killed them, dragged their bodies away. And all I could tell the rest to do was sit tight! It was hell for them! To sit tight when every instinct told them to run!”

Cummings let him rest for a moment.

“How did you get back and not the others?” he prodded, when it looked as if Turaczek’s twitching silence would last forever.

“I’m coming to that. I’m sorry; it is difficult to tell it. Give me time.”

Cummings was patient and the rest came eventually.

“The silence—if you could call it a silence with that gale—was broken. Not far off, very close in fact, there was a firing of rifles. We could see the muzzle flares dimly. It was like two groups fighting each other. The flares seemed to show that some of our men were fighting each other. Then I remembered the enemy had our rifles too. And I thought some of our men were fighting the enemy. I got up, ran towards the firing, prepared to help. When I got to the spot, I knew the truth.”

He sobbed, took quick control of himself, and went on as if determined to say it all and thereby get the horror out of his mind.

“There was a heap of bodies. All burned. Impossible to tell how many. There were arms and legs without bodies, torsos without heads. It was not a fight I had seen. It was evil destruction. Our missing men had been collected in a mass. The two groups I had seen firing must have been the enemy cremating their bodies!”

Cummings repeated: “How did you and you alone get back?”

“I ran! When I had seen the bodies, I remembered the men I had left lying in the mud, the men I had told to sit tight. I made to go back to them. And between me and my goal there was suddenly more firing. I began to fire myself. At nothing, you understand! I had a mad compulsion to kill the enemy we have never seen, and I flailed through the mud, firing dementedly as I went. . . . It did no good. There was no one left alive on the ground. Every man had been incinerated. So I kept on running. I kept on running, General. Running, running, running . . .”

Cummings felt that unless he wanted the ignominy of a retreat

back to Earth, he must have a showdown with the enemy. As yet he knew nothing of the enemy, their appearance, the size of their forces or their motives for killing. On the other hand, the enemy seemed to know every move he made and were able to pick off his men at will.

His appointed task was to establish a beach-head on Espresso. He looked like failing. He made a report to Earth, told them of his predicament, asked for reinforcements and said that in the meanwhile he was going to make an all-out assault to clear the territory around the ship. Once cleared, he would try to hold the area until help arrived.

He had left a skeleton squad to guard the ship and to receive any signals he made. Then he pushed into the fungus jungle with the rest of his men. Whitmore was one of the men who had been left.

And Whitmore, with Darro at his side, was now searching for Cummings and the main army.

Bendix had joined Lieberman in the dome.

"How's it going?"

"Dead. You fixed the bowl?"

"As best I can. But one good gust will warp it again. What does Whit expect—we got no proper tools, no nothing. I bet he doesn't even come back. He'll be carved or fried like the rest. That'll leave us real stuck."

"Whit'll be back."

"Where d'you get that confidence from, Lover Boy? He's no superman."

"Maybe not. But Whit always knows what he's doing——"

"He should tell us sometime. It might help if we knew what he was after."

"We know."

"Cummings?"

"——Cummings."

"He's dead. They're all dead. Why d'you think we haven't heard anything for days? You can't blame the atmo all the time. They're dead, Lover Boy. Like we'll all be dead pretty soon."

"You should have stayed outside, Bendix. I can't stand all this moral uplift."

"It isn't funny."

"Nobody said it was. I'm just saying I can do without the woe and misery."

"Lieberman——"

"Yes?"

"I was serious. I think we've had it. We're down to seventeen . . . all right, nineteen if Whit and Darro get back. Nineteen out of a hundred. And there's a million unseen baskets waiting to get the last nineteen. They don't like us, Lieberman. They don't want us here. We should never have left the ship."

"Cummings asked our help."

"Cummings! Know what he was after? A medal. A big gold medal for being the man who drove the first stake of a new colony. And us? We'd have got nothing. It would have been Cummings, Cummings, Cummings."

"Win or lose, Bendix, he gets the responsibility. He gets the kicks if the expedition fails."

"If? It has failed. He should have read what the signs said and got us out while he could. But no! He has to go glory-chasing into the great unknown!"

Lieberman hushed him while he listened intently. Then his tautness relaxed.

"Thought I heard something," he said.

"You won't. As I was saying, Cummings shouldn't have gone away like that."

"And you shouldn't talk like that. He did all right for a while. What was it they made? Forty miles. Forty miles without a death. That shows his policy of using a big force was sensible. The enemy were scared to attack."

Bendix snorted. "So instead of being content he decided to push his luck. In the next twenty miles he loses five men. And five more in the next twenty. But still he goes on and next thing we hear he's calling for mama."

Lieberman, always the earnest soul, lectured Bendix.

"It wasn't the way you make it sound, and you know it. He did a damn good job until a series of hurricanes bogged him down in the same spot for days. You can't blame him for that. That was just bad luck. And when the enemy took advantage of the situation and started sneak attacks, that wasn't his fault either. He didn't yell for mama. He sized up the situation, decided there were not a helluva lot of the enemy in the vicinity and it was a good place for a show-down. It was a chance to show our strength against theirs. So he called us, told us to seal the ship and get to him as fast as possible on the principle that he might win by sheer weight of numbers."

Bendix said: "And where is he now? Why doesn't he call?"

"Maybe he's too busy holding the fort until we get there."

"That's feeble, Lover Boy. Because he knows as well as we do that we can't find him without at least one more fix."

"In that case you'd better get the bowl up before Whit comes back. If he finds you sitting around, he'll chew your——"

Lieberman turned his head sharply, urged by the nameless sense which tells a man he has company. He saw Whitmore's upper torso squeezing into the dome.

"Don't bother with the bowl," Whitmore said. He brought his hand round his body and threw something on the floor of the dome.

It was a satchel. On it were marks of identification.

Five stars.

It must have been Lieberman's day for shocks. Right on top of Whitmore's sudden appearance he heard a faint bleep in his ear-phones. He waved for silence, adjusted his controls and got the bleep coming in strong and loud.

He was excited and grinning when he said to Whitmore: "He must have only lost his satchel. I've got his signal. Listen for yourself——"

Whitmore nodded for Lieberman to get out of the way. He took the phones and manipulated the controls himself, getting an accurate fix on the source of the incoming signal. When he finally laid the phones down, the steady bleep could still be faintly heard. And Whitmore looked puzzled.

"It doesn't figure," he said. "The satchel isn't empty. It's got his salt tablets and all his personal gear. Cummings isn't the type to lose things. Besides, there was the body."

"What body?" Bendix asked.

"We don't know. Usual thing—burned anonymous. Darro found it and the satchel. Adding two and two gives the obvious answer that the body was Cummings'."

"Yet there's a signal," said Lieberman.

"I know. That's what doesn't figure."

"Just because he was a general doesn't mean nobody else could use the radio, Whit."

"For most people I would say that was so. But you know how he was, he liked to do everything himself. I'm worried in case that signal is a trap——"

Bendix said: "Come off it! The humidity's softening your brains. I suppose you think the enemy has captured the general's

dome and has learned how to use the equipment—even if we've never seen one sign of machinery or apparatus of any kind."

Lieberman added: "Maybe their stuff is as invisible as they are."

"I'm still worried," Whitmore said. "I've thought about this to myself a lot. At first I only had suspicions. Now I'm almost sure. That's why I think that signal could be a trap."

"Sure of what?" asked Bendix.

"Sure that I know who the enemy is. I think you do too. *By name.*"

"By . . . Whit! Do you know what you're saying? Are you trying to tell us that Saki and Jimmy Hudson and all the rest, that they're sending that signal so we'll go out and be killed by them?"

"That's what I mean. Listen——"

Whitmore unburdened his suspicions. He made Bendix look at his own words: that no buildings had been seen, no enemy machinery, no evidence of intelligent life whatsoever. He tacked on the point Lieberman had made: that no enemy had been seen.

"All there is is vegetable life. Fungi. No little things like mice or big things like men. No birds. No insects. Nothing that crawls, walks or flies. Only fungi."

"Maybe," said Bendix, "maybe the planet hasn't got around to that stage of evolution yet."

"And maybe it has, but the animal life was killed off by the fungi!"

"You mean they're the enemy? They killed all our boys? But you said——"

Whitmore watched the expression change on Bendix's face. "You're beginning to get the answer I got. Some of the fungi—God knows which!—have done things to our men, turned them into murderers. That's why the so-called enemy was never seen sneaking up to do a killing."

Lieberman looked very young as he said: "These fungi—do you think they know what they're doing? Is it a conscious act on their part?"

"That's the biggest mystery," Whitmore said. "When you plant a seed upside down, does the seed actually think when it still sends the root growth downwards and the plant growth up to the light? I believe that's as near an analogy as we'll get to what motivates the fungi. This planet isn't overstrong on nitrogen. The human body is a good source of that element."

Bendix looked at the blotches on his body. "So any moment I

could grab an E-gun and fry you! And just so the things in me would be providing food for their brothers. Is that it?"

Whitmore slapped one fist into the palm of the other hand. "I wish I knew. I told you, this is only a guess."

"Whit," said Lieberman. "If they eventually kill us all off, they'll have killed their source of food. I mean—well, if you have a herd of cattle, you don't kill them all for beef."

"Parasites are different. They kill senselessly. About ninety per cent. of all parasites kill their hosts, even if it does in the end mean their own death. They seem to know what they're doing up to a certain point and then their intelligence peters out."

The faint but persistent bleep from the earphones prompted Lieberman to ask: "Suppose you're wrong, Whit——"

The ex-schoolmaster punched his hand again. "I've thought about that. If I was sure I was right, our duty would be to make our way back to the ship, call Earth and tell them to forget about this place. But if we did that and I was wrong, we'd be leaving a platoon of men marooned out there."

"What are you going to do?" asked Bendix.

"I'm going to do nothing. I'm leaving the decision to you, to all of us after I've told the others what I suspect."

The decision was swung by sentiment against reason. Whitmore's theories sounded feasible. The more they were thought about, the more feasible they became. So nobody thought about them too long. A quick decision was taken. The men who were transmitting the direction-finding signal were their buddies. If they were under the influence of a homicidal fungus, that was all the more motive for finding them, capturing them if possible, and taking them back home to be cured.

For one more weary time they slung their blisters and pushed into the humidity in the direction of the signal's source, with Hock and Newcastle guiding the communications dome.

Whitmore tried to convince himself he was not being a coward when he wished the decision had gone the other way. But he could not help fortifying his theory with new data. He remembered Turaczek's outburst: his confession to a mad compulsion to kill.

He even managed to account for the fact that none of his squad had been affected; until they had set out in answer to Cummings' request, they had been more or less isolated from the others and had not previously ventured into the fungus-ridden jungle.

Since this latter fact was no longer true, he determined to keep a sharp eye on his companions.



He forgot to include one man in this surveillance.

He forgot to watch himself.

The wind was howling in their faces at close on fifty miles per hour. They had to push hard against it to make any headway. Two men joined Hock and Newcastle who were having trouble with the dome. Everyone sweated like a pig. Everyone cursed the heat and the humidity.

But no one would stop. They were driven by the incentive that comes when the end of a race is in sight. On top of which they felt an urgency to see Cummings and his patrol—or what was left of it.

Whitmore put Darro out as lead man to give himself the freedom necessary to circulate among the others to see that no one got lost and to see that no one got homicidal impulses. It meant he had to cover a lot more ground than anyone else. He got sweatier and muddier and more fatigued than anyone else. But at the back of his mind was a faint picture of Julie; she was never going to taunt him with having bitten off more than he could chew.

He was up beside Darro when they came across the lost patrol.

Travelling through murk and mud it was almost impossible to judge distance. Whitmore had known they must be getting close to the patrol. But for the last hour fatigue and humidity had made time seem featureless, without the division of minutes and seconds. He had not realised how close they had got to their objective.

A sodium-yellow aurora lit up the fog, ahead and to the right of him. He recognised the energy-rifle fusillade before the crackle of gunfire reached his ears. He threw himself flat, oblivious to the glutinous black porage that slapped open to receive his body, oblivious to the squelched and stinking fungi that filled his mouth and his nostrils when he hit the ground.

He heard another burst of fire. He spat his mouth empty, cleaned his nostrils with thumb and snort. He rolled on one shoulder, tried to make out the figures of his men in the steamy gloom. So far as he could see, they had followed his example and were hugging the ground for safety.

He was sobbing for breath. Exertion and heat had made his heart thump.

After a third flicker, the firing ended. The wind filled his ears and his mind. He could not hear whether anyone was approaching. He could no longer think clearly. He wished he could make a hole in the vapour-laden gloom. He slid his E-rifle forward until he had the barrel in his left hand.

He loosed a long flaming burst into the amorphous gloom before him.

Suddenly there was fierce light and fire all around him. His action had been taken as a signal. He sensed that near him men had got to their feet and were plunging forward to meet the assailants who had attacked them.

He pulled his knees under him, pushed with one hand and launched himself into a stumbling run. The reprisal which he had inadvertently started was bringing more flares of energy from up ahead. It was like running into the back end of an ion rocket.

The atmosphere had a brightness that nature never gave it. Yet it was still as diffuse and unclear. But visibility of a kind was available for twice its normal distance.

Silhouetted against a background of green fog, and haloed with a yellow aura of light from the energy guns, Whitmore could see a group of men. There might have been a dozen, or twice that number, or even more; the picture blurred at the edges and men merged with the mist.

But they were men. Naked men. Firing at Whitmore's group. His fears had been justified.

For a moment he looked at them with an almost academic interest. Time and motion were slowed down. He was aware that Cummings' patrol was shooting at his, but it did not register that death was involved. He saw one figure stop its random spraying of energy. He saw the figure face in a forward direction. He saw it raise its rifle from the hip to the shoulder.

He was almost too late in realising that he was the target.

He had been running all this time. He had covered a lot of ground without being detected. But now his advance had been spotted and it was going to be stopped.

He poked his own rifle out like a spear and fired as he ran. He hit the figure low down. Its legs disappeared and it dropped vertically to its flaming stumps.

From then on, Whitmore was a convert to the cause of death.

The killing of his would-be assailant meant nothing to him. He forgot him in his concentration on the other figures ahead.

He kept on running and kept on firing until he was alone in an area that stank of burned flesh. The enemy had been wiped out or had skulked into the seclusion and the safety of the vaporous atmosphere.

Whitmore turned around. He detected shooting from another direction.

He started to run again, back to where he had come from. He was a superman. He could run forever, he felt. The heat and humidity no longer bothered him.

More figures appeared. Again he fired. And soon he was alone again.

He prowled about for a while, looking for something else to shoot at. He found nothing. He sat down.

Slowly the homicidal urge ebbed. He noticed he was sitting among dead men. He put down his rifle, crawled among them, peering close to examine their faces.

He began to remember.

Afraid that the human part of him would be swamped again, he scurried frantically over the bodies, identifying, memorising, counting. He went across to the remains of Cummings' patrol. Again he counted and named the dead.

He could not identify everyone. Some were so burned as to be unrecognisable. He could not even account for the total number of

the two patrols. Many were missing from Cummings' group—but he guessed that the vacancies had occurred earlier, before he had caught up with them.

He found seventeen of his own men. One was not among the dead.

He was glad he did not find Darro's body.

He went looking for Darro.

But it was Darro who found Whitmore.

The little Irishman had been lying in the mud nursing a minor burn on his arm. In the howling wind he did not hear Whitmore approach. In his concentration on the wound he did not see him. It was a showering of ooze over his shoulders, splashed by Whitmore's running feet, that told him someone had passed.

He stifled an impulse to shout. He got up, took his rifle and followed the lumbering figure. He got within feet of Whitmore, close enough to recognise him, and still the man in front was too intent on staring into the gloom to notice that he was being followed.

Darro got close, stuck out a foot and Whitmore tripped. The Irishman jumped on his fallen body, hard enough to knock the breath out of him for a moment. Then he stood wide-legged, waiting for the other to uncoil himself and sit up.

"We're going back to the ship," he told Whitmore.

"Not me, Paddy. I can't go back."

"Where's your gun?"

"I left it. Deliberately."

"You mean you lost it——"

"I walked away from it. Paddy, listen to me. I've been killing. Killing wildly and for no reason. It started as self-defence. Then it became murder, then senseless slaughter. I left my gun because if I had it now I would kill you!"

Darro's hesitation was only slight. "Okay, I'll be careful. But I can't leave you here. I'm taking you back to the ship, you and anyone else we can find."

"There's nobody else. Just you and me. And I'm glad it's you I'm talking to because you're the strong one, Paddy, you're the one who can make it back to the ship alone . . . Don't argue, it has to be that way. If I go along, I'll find some way of killing you. Then who's going to call Earth to tell them to write this planet off the books? Not me, I can't go back. Maybe they could cure me before I started killing again, but I couldn't live with what I've already done."

Darro covered him with his rifle. "Get up, Whit. You

couldn't help what you did. And I'll take a chance on getting you back."

Whitmore beat his hands in the mud. His features were warped, knotted and twisted with the effort to control himself. He screamed.

"Kill me, Darro! For God's sake, kill me!"

"Let's go——" Darro's invitation was made calmly.

Whitmore could feel the blind red urge returning rapidly. He knew what was going to happen. But he was determined it was going to happen now and happen his way. If he waited, his acquired instinct for murder would probably make him too quick for Darro.

He got to his knees. "Paddy!" he roared. "You dumb Irish——!"

He launched himself forward.

Darro side-stepped, tripped him into the mud again.

Whitmore sobbed. He knew that even now he was almost capable of besting the other. He pushed hard, got up on his feet and swayed. He put his hands out, thumbs touching, fingers spread to the width of a man's neck. He took a step forward.

"I'll club you," Darro warned.

Clubbing was not enough. Whitmore dropped his hands. He plunged sideways into the gloom.

"Now try it!" he yelled. "You had your chance when I didn't have a gun. Well, now it's even. I've got a gun too."

He charged back towards Darro, crouching low.

"Don't make me do it, Whit!"

Whitmore did not stop. A lance of fire scorched the mud in front of him. He did not stop. An orange spear crisped the top of his hair. He did not stop.

He did not stop until one of his legs folded under him, burned off at the ankle. Even then his progress was only momentarily halted. Like a wounded animal, he shambled forward on three limbs. He could see Darro's knees within reach. He clawed for a grip on them. But at the last moment he cunningly changed his mind and rolled aside in case the Irishman tried to stun him.

"You didn't find a gun!" Darro accused.

"Kill me," Whitmore repeated. This time he was quieter, not pleading, and the intensity had gone out of his voice. "You'll have to do it, Paddy. You know I can't live with this wound in this climate."

Darro refused. "Whatever's got into you hasn't affected me yet. I can't do it, Whit. Not in cold blood. I've done a lot of

things in my life that I wasn't too proud of, but I couldn't do that. Neither can I just leave you to die."

Overhead, the featureless sky was suddenly ripped apart by tremendous rivers of lightning that had their source somewhere below the horizon and forked their way to neutrality in a thousand deltas. The wind began to die miraculously.

Before thunder could drown his words, Whitmore said weakly, "You've got to get to the ship. You've got to tell them back home——"

"I know. I'll make it, don't worry about that, Whit. And because I won't need it and you will, I'm leaving the rifle."

Again the sky was torn by lightning, throwing up clearly the agony of mind that was etched on Whitmore's face.

Darro saw the expression and understood.

He said, "I'll leave it over here—out of your reach. By the time you manage to crawl to it, I'll be too far away for you to do any damage."

He cut the parting short. He said, "Good luck, Whit," and loped into the storm-shattered landscape.

Whitmore ignored the gun. He had done with killing.

It began to rain. As he sat and watched his life pumping out of the stump of his leg, into the pools of rain-water, he had the smile of a man who had accomplished something.

ROBERT PRESSLIE

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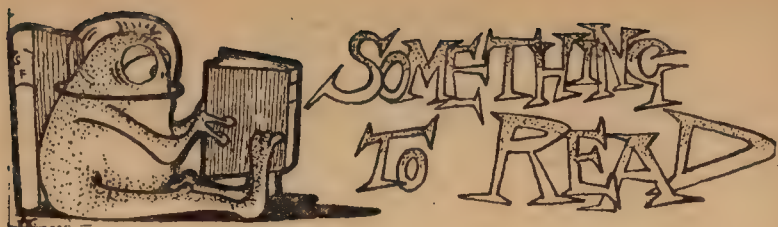
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New Hard-Cover Science Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

There is nothing new in my column this month, but among the titles mentioned you may find some you've not read, and which will be worth reading. At long last we can give you some results on our research into the "Best Science Fiction" in the opinion of the readers of NEBULA Science Fiction.

A number of points raised by the folk who did not send in the full lists, or sent in unpreferred lists, have been answered individually, but for everyone's sake a few words of explanation are required. I ran a "test" on a group of 6 folk, asking for 6 books in order of preference. I then doubled the number of books, and found that in several cases books which were not included on the first 6 now came in the top 3 of the lists submitted by the same people. The general reason offered ran on the lines of "I'd not thought of that one when I wrote out the 6, but now I recall it, I think it better than . . ." Therefore we asked for 25

titles to try to get readers to consider their lists. Anyone can sit down and list 6 or 10 titles—but it calls for a little more thought to list 25. But perhaps we made it slightly too big a job! Then the question of "Why order of preference? Why not just a list?" Well, the answer to that will be apparent when you look at the "Placing" and "Mentioned" lists which follow. The "Placing" list is that which is based on "order of preference"; each title having been allotted a number of points according to its placing on each list; the "Mentioned" list just gives 1 point to each book for inclusion on a list—in other words, its position depends on how many people have voted for it, irrespective of their opinion of its worth. For instance, George R. Stewart's EARTH ABIDES was only listed on 3 of the 12 lists, but because of high placing it comes 13th on the "Placing" list, but is not on the "Mentioned" list.

PLACING		MENTIONED	
1	FOUNDATION: Isaac Asimov	132	MORE THAN HUMAN: Theodore Sturgeon 8
2	THE DEMOLISHED MAN: Alfred Bester	125	THE DEMOLISHED MAN: Alfred Bester 8
3	MORE THAN HUMAN: Theodore Sturgeon	114	I, ROBOT: Isaac Asimov 7
4	CITY: Clifford D. Simak	95	FOUNDATION: Isaac Asimov 6
5	TIGER, TIGER: Alfred Bester	92	THE CITY AND THE STARS: Arthur C. Clarke 6
6	THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS: John Wyndham	91	THE CHILDREN OF THE ATOM: Wilmar H. Shiras 6
7	I, ROBOT: Isaac Asimov	88	THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS: John Wyndham 6
8	A MIRROR FOR OBSERVERS: Edgar Pangborn	87	THE CAVES OF STEEL: Isaac Asimov 5
9	THE DEATH OF GRASS: John Christopher	86	TIGER, TIGER: Alfred Bester 5
10	SLAN: A. E. van Vogt	85	THE DEATH OF GRASS: John Christopher 5
11	CHILDHOOD'S END: Arthur C. Clarke	83	CHILDHOOD'S END: Arthur C. Clarke 5
12	THE PUPPET MASTERS: Robert A. Heinlein	74	THE PUPPET MASTERS: Robert A. Heinlein 5
13	EARTH ABIDES: George R. Stewart	72	UNTOUCHED BY HUMAN HANDS: Robert Sheckley 5
14	THE CITY AND THE STARS: Arthur C. Clarke	63	CITY: Clifford D. Simak 5
15	THE CHILDREN OF THE ATOM: Wilmar H. Shiras	62	SLAN: A. E. van Vogt 5
16	I AM LEGEND: Richard Matheson	57	THE ILLUSTRATED MAN: Ray Bradbury 4
17	THE CAVES OF STEEL: Isaac Asimov	55	PRELUDE TO SPACE: Arthur C. Clarke 4
18	STORIES FOR TOMORROW: William Sloane (editor)	51	ONE IN 300: J. T. McIntosh 4
19	THE WEAPON MAKERS: A. E. van Vogt	50	CHRISTMAS EVE (Not This August): C. M. Kornbluth 4
20	THE SPACE MERCHANTS: Frederik Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth	48	A MIRROR FOR OBSERVERS: Edgar Pangborn 4
21	RING AROUND THE SUN: Clifford D. Simak	47	THE SPACE MERCHANTS: Frederik Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth 4
22	THE LORD OF THE RINGS: Prof. J. R. R. Tolkien	45	STORIES FOR TOMORROW: William Sloane (Editor) 4

I have finished the list at 22 rather than 20 or 25 titles because of the "Mentioned" listing. The figures following titles in this listing indicate the number of mentions, and this covers all those which received inclusion in 4 of the lists. A further 10 titles were mentioned on at least 3 lists, and it would obviously be absurd to pursue this limited survey to that length. The figure following the titles in the "Placing" list is, of course, the number of points secured by that title. In comparing the two lists it must be noted that titles receiving the same number of "mentions" have been placed in alphabetical order of author, and thus the fact that **TIGER**, **TIGER** is in 5th position on the first list, and 9th on the second, does not mean a great deal. However, some slight conclusion can be drawn from the fact that 5 people awarded 92 points to **TIGER**, **TIGER**; while Robert Heinlein's **THE PUPPET MASTERS**, still with 5 mentions in the lists, was placed much lower with only 74 points. Various other conclusions can be drawn—for example, **THE LORD OF THE RINGS** secured its 22nd place on the list with only 2 votes, thus beating all the 10 titles which appeared on 3 lists. Two people thus rated this work very highly, and on checking those lists I find that one of the 2 people rather definitely prefers "fantasy" to "strict science-fiction". He is also one of the only 2 people to give Abraham Merritt a mention!

By and large, anthologies were ignored. The William Sloane edited **STORIES FOR TOMORROW** is the only one which

received more than 1 vote! (When it is recalled that this work was "remaindered", it does not seem that a preference list of this kind would be a great deal of use to publishers . . .) If one accepts "collections" like Simak's **CITY**, in which the stories form a connected whole, as "novels", the only two "collections" to obtain a mention are the Sheckley work, and Bradbury's **THE ILLUSTRATED MAN** (this latter would have secured 23rd place on the points-awarded list). So one could conclude that although "collections" and "anthologies" are popular enough when printed, they do not live long in the memory.

Heading the poll came Isaac Asimov, with 26 mentions covering 8 books, and Arthur C. Clarke was next with 21 mentions for 6 books. Close behind came A. E. van Vogt, although his 18 mentions were spread over 10 titles. Compare that with the next in line, Alfred Bester, who was included 13 times with only 2 titles! Then Robert A. Heinlein, 10 mentions on 4 titles, and neck and neck Ray Bradbury and Eric Frank Russell, both 10 mentions on 5 books. Theodore Sturgeon had 9 mentions on 2 books (if the 9th time had also been for **MORE THAN HUMAN**, he would have topped both lists), and Clifford Simak 9 with 3. . . for your interest, Jules Verne, "Father of Science Fiction" according to some authorities, did not get one mention, and Britain's own H. G. Wells was only listed twice, with 2 different titles. Olaf Stapledon did get 4 listings, equally divided between **ODD JOHN** and **LAST AND FIRST MEN**.



BOB

MADLE'S

SS
American letters

By Airmail from the U.S.A.

First of all, a brief statement concerning this brand-new department is probably appropriate. Its scope will be vast—for it is intended that it will cover all aspects of the science fiction field, slanted, primarily, from the American point of view.

Those of you who have been reading Walter Willis's excellent department in this magazine are well-acquainted with the science-fiction fan movement. Walt has told you a great deal about this group of loyal, vociferous, and extremely enthusiastic readers of science fiction. He has indicated how this group writes letters to the various discussion columns of *Nebula* and its contemporaries; he has talked of science fiction collections; and he has described other facets of the fan field, such as the intensive correspondence within the group, the publication of innumerable amateur publications ("fanzines"), and the length to which many fans will go to attain personal contact—through conferences and conventions, which are held all over the world. Yes, the science fiction fan is an enthusiast. And he is a philanthropist also. Which brings me to the subject of "The Transatlantic Fan Fund," our lesson for today.

Like many other things in the

s-f world, it all started with Forrest J. Ackerman. Forry, who is known in America as "Mr. Science Fiction," has been reading s-f since 1926 and has been a science fiction fan since the inception of the term. He was projected into fandom through being a demon letter writer, and he started at a very early age. I can still recall his first letter-to-the-editor. It appeared in the Fall, 1929 issue of *Science Wonder Quarterly* and started off thusly: "Although I am only twelve years old. . . ." Through this, and subsequent letters, Forry obtained many, many correspondents, a large number of whom were residents in Great Britain.

During World War II, when it appeared that the British fan world was doomed to extinction, Forry kept it alive by contributions of books, magazines, paper, money—even mimeo stencils. As legend will have it, his British s-f friends wanted to repay Forry by paying his way to the U.K. Forry, philanthropist that he is, wanted it the other way. He wanted *American* fans to bring a *British* fan to America for a World Convention. As a matter of fact, Forry wanted to bring two British s-f fans to America simultaneously, if possible.

Thus was created "The Big

Pond Fund," which was one of the projects of the 1947 World Science Fiction Convention, held in Philadelphia. The basic idea behind the Big Pond Fund was that fandom, through voluntary contributions, would pay the passage of the first fan ambassador. Unfortunately, fandom was comparatively young (and small) and it wasn't until 1949 that Forry's dream materialised when Ted Carnell made it to the "Cinvention", held in Cincinnati, Ohio. And even at that Ted paid a good portion of his expenses out of his own pocket. But the die was cast.

Some time in 1949 a young fan appeared on the scene with an unpretentious publication called *Slant*. This fan resided in Ireland and, as he was unaware of other fans in Ireland, communicated with American fans by sending them his magazine. The result of this was a large number of correspondents and an excellent staff of writers. This, coupled with meticulous typesetting and excellent format, catapulted *Slant* to the top group of fanzines. And up the ladder with *Slant* went its meticulous editor, Walter A. Willis.

In 1951 Shelby Vick started a campaign to bring Willis, the fan world's brightest new star, to the "Nolacon" (New Orleans). However, the campaign didn't bear fruit until 1952 when Walt made it to the "Chicon" (Chicago, Illinois). When Walt returned to Ireland he wrote up a lengthy report of his trip, "The Harp Stateside". This interesting document appeared in many instalments in various fanzines and has now been published complete in pamphlet form. (Obtain-

able from Willis for 2/- or 35 cents at 170 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast, Ireland. (And with the publication of "The Harp Stateside" another fannish tradition was born, for it is expected that the recipient of the TAFF trip will write up his adventures so general fandom (or those who contributed for the trip) will be able to read it.

Immediately following the 1952 "Chicon" Donald E. Ford, of Ohio, started a campaign to bring an English friend of his to the 1953 World Convention in Philadelphia. However, the friend, one Norman Ashfield of London, proved unable to come. Ford wrote to Willis offering the money to any British fan who might be able to make the trip. Ford's letter arrived just about the time of the British Coroncon (1953) and it resulted in Willis, Carnell, Ken Slater, and several other fans organising The Transatlantic Fan Fund.

"Southgate in '58!" has been a legendary fannish war-cry for many years. And Southgate in '58 it was, for Los Angeles, which is a suburb of Southgate, was awarded this past year's convention. Ron Bennett, editor of the fan magazine *Ploy*, was the choice of both Britain and America, and has just recently completed a three-week stay in the colonies.

This brief report has attempted to cover TAFF history and display how solid and worthy a fan effort it is. Anyone who is interested in seeing the fine fannish tradition of TAFF become even more popular is invited to write to Walt Willis at the address already mentioned.



WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

While James White was having tea with us the other night he mentioned casually that he'd just sold a story in Italy. Naturally I was spiritually uplifted to learn of this fresh advance of culture and enlightenment and I cast about for some diplomatic way of putting the question which lies nearest to the hearts of all us dedicated missionaries of science fiction. "How much?" was how I phrased it. "Eleven thousand lira," he said sonorously, and went on to talk about his model train set. "And how much is that in sordid sterling?" I pursued, wondering if he'd let me drive his Maserati. James had already made his mark in Germany, not to mention his kroner in Sweden, and we were becoming minor authorities on currency exchange rates. "I suppose you'll keep on your job at the Co for a while?" "Yes," said James, "I think I'd better. After deductions it works out at £4 14s. 10d." "Still a five-figure cheque," I pointed out. "Yes," said James, brightening, "and, besides, you must admit it's nicer to be paid two lira a word than a few guineas a thousand."

I agreed. You have to be pretty famous to be paid by the single word in Britain. I've heard that Arthur Conan Doyle got 5/- a word for the later Sherlock

Holmes stories but I hope I'm not destroying any illusions when I say that few science fiction magazines, even NEBULA, can afford to pay that much, even to authors who are turning out better science fiction than Doyle ever did.

Last month, as you probably don't remember, I mentioned how much science fiction was just fairy stories. The same thought has occurred to Edmund Crispin, anthologist of *Best SF Three*, and he has come up with a very snappy comeback which you can quote if anyone ever makes this criticism in your presence. Towards the end of his preface Edmund hauls off and delivers the following telling counterpunch:

"... they differ from conventional fairy tales in carrying a massive, so to say epiphenomenal, load of religious, political, ethical and sociological implication, and so, at their best, provide intellectual stimulation of a generalised variety which mainstream fiction is incapable of embodying in any tolerable form."

I'll bet this will silence your opponent, at least until he has a chance to sneak off and look up "epiphenomenal" in the dictionary.

Which brings me back to this

question of word rates. Don't you think it's ridiculous to treat all words as if they were the same value? It's obvious that a complicated piece of semantic machinery like "epiphenomenal" is worth a dozen "ands" and "buts", and an author capable of operating it without it falling on him deserves a bonus. I'm not suggesting we should go back to paying authors by the line—I don't like stories consisting entirely of dialogue any more than you do—but that science fiction could be improved if we introduced a differential scale for words. Why, for instance, should an author get paid for conjunctions when he doesn't get paid for full-stops? And then, take adjectives. Everyone knows that the excessive use of adjectives is a sign of bad writing and after you've written anything you should go over it and strike them all out. But you can't expect an author paid the present way to do it when every stroke of the pencil is taking bread out of the mouths of his starving children. So suppose we pay half the standard rate for adjectives, and of course adverbs.

Nouns and verbs, on the other hand, are good since they mean thought and action, so we'll pay double for those. Taking it even further, we could encourage colourful and poetic writing by paying special bonuses for "like" and "as if". Eventually we might work out a point value for every word in the language.

You may suggest this would be too complicated, but I'd reply that this is the sort of problem that would be child's play to the keen mathematical minds of our professional editors, easy as falling off a logarithm. In fact this sort of thing is being done already, by the electronic computer school of literary critics. What these people do is count all the words in an author's work and find the number of times each of them recurs. Then by comparing these frequencies with statistical norms, they can deduce such things as that Shakespeare was two other people or that Dickens had an Oedipus complex. What interests me, though, is that they really can make quite legitimate deductions about an author's education, background, knowledge and method of thinking, whether imaginative or concrete and so on. It seems to me that all that is needed to improve the standard of science fiction is for our editors to subject to statistical analysis the words used in all the really good science fiction that's been published so far and base their rates on the results. Naturally this would have to be kept dark to prevent authors cashing in unfairly and if Peter Hamilton adopts the system I promise to tell hardly anyone. I wonder if James will let me drive his Jaguar?

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LETTERS TO
THE EDITOR

Dear Mr. Hamilton—The lead story in NEBULA No. 36 was very good. As well as being a suspense yarn, it provided some thought - provoking concepts. Healing by non-physical methods is to my mind a well established fact, and certainly a valid subject for science fiction. In a day and age when men are giving up, one by one, all the old outlooks upon the nature and origin of life, it is refreshing to find a new alternative to scientific materialism. As we penetrate into the mysteries of the Universe and the mind, we find evidence of a real rational religion. Sometimes I feel that science fiction takes up a very petty and unscientific attitude to the spiritual possibilities of life; for all possibilities are scientific possibilities.

JAMES INGLIS,

Girvan,
Scotland.

* *An interesting point, James. Modern scientific thought and discovery have been responsible for the outmoding of a great deal of the intractable and materialistic mumbo-jumbo of nineteenth-century science, and I am certain, in the years to come, a great deal of that which is even yet considered to be impossible, or unscientific, will assume its proper place in human understanding.*

Dear Mr. Hamilton.—Going through some science fiction books at my local newsagents, NEBULA caught my eye. I was so impressed with the novelette "The Captain's Dog" that from now on, I intend to be a regular reader of your outstanding science fiction magazine.

DAVID MOIR,

London, E.1,
England.

* *I am glad to hear it, David. There are many fine stories scheduled for future issues also.*

Dear Sir—I once read an advertisement for a Science Fiction Book Club in your magazine, and vowed I would join it. Then I discovered I had swapped the magazine without realising it was the one I wanted.

Do you know of such a Club, and if so could you please take pity on a science fiction addict and send me the details?

MISS BARBARA FOLWELL,
Market Harborough,
Leicestershire,
England.

* *Certainly, Barbara. Among the best British Book Clubs, specialising in Science Fiction is the S.F.B.C. at 38 William IV Street, London, W.C.2. This firm has had prominent*

ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1959 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below, or on a postcard if preferred, and mail it immediately to NEBULA, 101 Greenhead Street, Glasgow, S.E.

Infection	
Survey Corps	
The World He Left Behind Him	
The Return	
The Lieutenant	
Suicide Squad	

Name and address :

Mr. A. V. Russell of Wolverhampton wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 36. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was :

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| 1. THE HARD WAY | |
| By Dan Morgan | 25.5% |
| 2. SIGHT OF A SILHOUETTE | |
| By Brian W. Aldiss | 22.0% |
| 3. IT | |
| By John Kippax | 20.6% |
| 4. WALLPAPER WAR | |
| By E. C. Tubbs | 19.4% |
| 5. SELL ME A DREAM | |
| By Stuart Allen | 12.5% |

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in Nebula No. 42.

advertisements in several recent issues of NEBULA, but would doubtless send further information as well as an enrolment form on request.

Whilst on the subject, I think that the most amazing offer by a Book Club anywhere in the world—open to American readers only, unfortunately—is a free reservation on the first passenger space ship to the Moon! This, as well as information about such mundane things as forthcoming science fiction titles, can be had from The Science Fiction Book Club, Garden City, N.Y.

QUESTION SPOT

In which scientific questions from our readers are answered by one of our "Photo Feature" team of experts.

Dear Sir.—Would you please explain the method by which the age of fossils can be ascertained by measurement of their radioactivity.

T. D. BRYANT,
Newcastle, 3.

- * Dr. Archie Roy says: Cosmic rays, entering the Earth's upper atmosphere, produce fast moving neutrons that collide with nitrogen atoms of atomic weight 14. The collisions change the nitrogen atoms into atoms of an isotope of carbon called carbon-14, in contrast to normal carbon-12. In nature the proportion of carbon-14 to carbon-12 atoms is very small but the carbon-14 atoms are radioactive and make their presence felt to modern electronic counters by

throwing out electrons and becoming nitrogen once more. This decay of carbon-14 proceeds at a fixed rate that neither heat nor cold nor any other process can vary. In a quantity of carbon-14, half of it will have disintegrated in five and a half thousand years, a period of time called the half-life. Half of the remainder will have disappeared in a further 5,500 years and so on.

It was soon seen that here was a method of dating archaeological remains.

Radiocarbon, as carbon-14 is often called, combines with oxygen to form carbon dioxide. The plant-life of the Earth uses carbon dioxide in building its food. Plants are eaten by animal life so that all living creatures contain a fixed proportion of carbon-14 to carbon-12. When a plant or an animal dies, the proportion gradually diminishes, according to the carbon-14 half-life scale, thus providing a means of telling when death took place.

Any organic material found by the archaeologist at a site will therefore date that site with considerable accuracy. Hundreds of such dates have now been found.

For example wood from the funeral ship of an Egyptian king was enough to date it as 3,600 years old. Again charcoal from the fire-places of ancient man can tell when he lived. The last Ice Age ended barely 10,000 years ago, according to carbon-dating of the remains of wood and peat, crushed under debris left by the great ice sheet. The method has been used to check the authen-

ticity of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Their linen wrappings date them to be about 1,900 years old. The error in such dates may be of order plus or minus one hundred and fifty years which may be improved in time, while the practical limit to the time-span would seem to be about 60,000 years, quite long enough to cover all the most interesting treasures of man's past history dug up by archaeologists in past years.

Dear Sir—I have heard that many of the satellites of the outer planets are composed entirely of frozen water. Is there any truth in this?

PHILIP ARTHURLY,

Leeds, II.

The 1959 World Science Fiction Convention will be known as DETENTION, meeting Friday, September 4th through Monday, September 7th at the Pick-Fort Shelby Hotel in Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A. Guest of Honour and other arrangements will be announced shortly.

Membership in DETENTION is available for 7/2 to everyone living outside North America. British and European memberships may be sent to DETENTION's British agent, Ron Bennett, 7 Southway Arthur's Avenue, Harrogate, Yorkshire, England. All members will receive copies of all progress reports, a membership card, and the programme booklet, even if they are unable to attend.

You'll like DETENTION. It's good for you!

THE DETENTION COMMITTEE
Fred Prophet and Roger Sims,
Co-Chairmen.

★ Dr. Archie Roy says: The Solar System contains thirty-one natural satellites ranging in size from Saturn's Titan, of diameter over 3,000 miles and larger than the planet Mercury, down to Mars' Deimos and Phobos, under ten miles across. Some, like the Galilean moons of Jupiter, have been studied for over three centuries and can be seen in small telescopes; others are so small and faint that they can never be seen by the eye at a terrestrial telescope but require long-exposure photography before their light makes an image on the photographic plate capable of being detected.

About these faint satellites' physical constitutions we know nothing. It is certainly not true that astronomers believe them to be composed entirely of frozen water. The four outer satellites of Jupiter are thought by some to be captured asteroids and thus may be rocky in nature since it is probable that the asteroids are solid, irregularly-shaped lumps of rock.

Mr. Arthurly may in fact be

thinking of the knowledge we have of the densities of the four big satellites of Jupiter. From a knowledge of their diameters and masses—they show discs in telescopes and perturb each others' orbits considerably—their mean densities can be calculated. It is found that they come out to be 2.9, 2.9, 2.2 and 0.6 times that of water. This means that it is probable that the inner two are rocky, like our Moon, and Jeffreys has suggested that the third and fourth may be composed largely of ice or solid carbon dioxide—"dry ice."

It is possible, too, that three of Saturn's satellites, Mimas, Tethys and Dione, have mean densities below that of water. If so Jeffreys' suggestion may fit them too. But this suggestion about the constitutions of five of the Solar System's moons is a long way from knowing that many of the satellites of the outer planets are composed entirely of frozen water! The truth of the matter, in fact, will have to wait until these remote bodies have been visited by mankind in the not-so-distant future.

LOOK HERE—Continued from page 2

In spite of all that has been said, however, one fact remains demonstrably clear, science fiction is in just as healthy a condition now as it was a year ago, and with the vast new potential readership opened to us by the staggering scientific achievements of the last few months, should, with intelligent promotion, and the introduction of a more optimistic flavour, very soon rise to a rightfully popular position amongst intelligent readers throughout the world.

I think that a very excellent summing up of all this was given us by Her Majesty the Queen during her radio and television broadcast on Christmas Day, 1958, when she said: "We have no plans for space travel . . . as yet."

Peter Hamilton

Continued from inside front cover

They said that elliptical galaxies were the youngest, spiral-armed galaxies allegedly being much older. Yet spiral galaxies are the brighter.

Weizacker's theory of galactic evolution has something in common with this—he suggested that the spiral arms unwound from the nucleus just as a drop of cream poured into a cup of stirred black coffee swirls and, caught by the slower moving streams near the edge of the cup, is forced into spirals.

Jeans suggested that the arms were really tides, produced by the gravitational attraction of nearby galaxies, being impelled outwards as the galaxies' nuclei contracted and spun faster.

We still know little about the true mode of galactic formation; but now we are certain which are the oldest and which the youngest of the galaxies.

The young galaxies are the irregular ones, rich in gas and dust, shining brilliantly with the harsh blue light of Population I stars new born from their gas clouds.

The oldest galaxies are the elliptical star clouds, usually small, lit only by the old Population II stars which burn steadily after the giant spend-thrift blue stars have guttered into extinction. Elliptical galaxies are the commonest in space. Since small galaxies age faster than large ones this view fits in well with the idea that the monotonous character of elliptical galaxies is due to their senility.

Somewhere in between these extremes come the normal and barred spirals. The shape of a spiral galaxy seems logically right; you have a thick nucleus and the whole rotates so that arms spiral off in a graceful motion like a multi-million year old catherine wheel.

But why, then, should a galaxy develop a bar—a structure which must rotate like a solid spoke, relatively speaking, trailing its spirals from either side?

The answer to this enigma probably lies in the high concentration of gas in the bar, a substratum which is highly viscous in comparison with the near emptiness of intergalactic space. Too, the great magnetic fields and movements of electrical currents in the clouds of the bar may well play an important part in welding the whole into what appears to be a semi-solid state. Both the bars and the spiral arms are visible only by virtue of the stars condensed out of their gas.

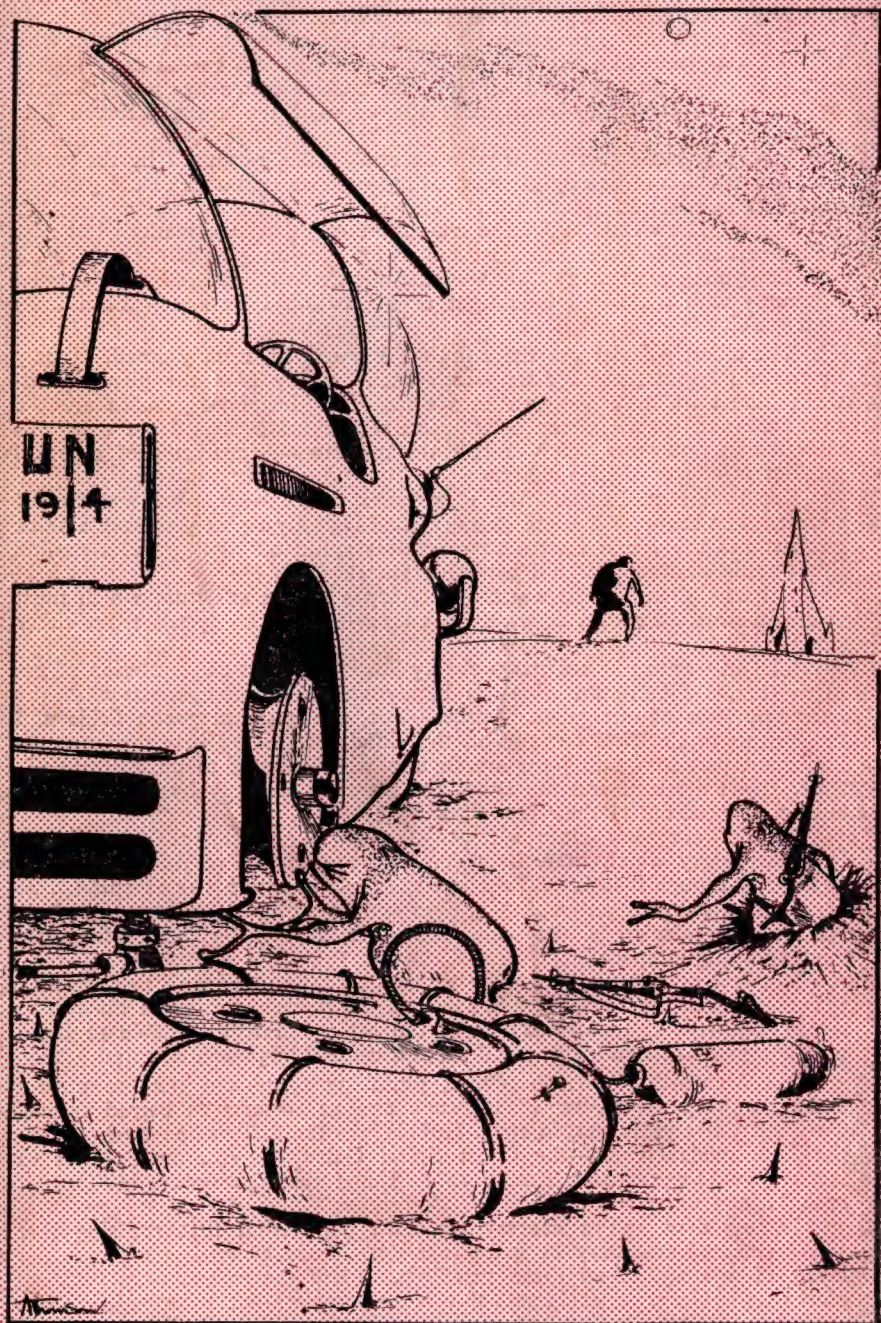
One of our very close systems—the large Magellanic Cloud—is an irregular galaxy which may, in a few million years, give us a vital clue. It looks as though it is just in the process of becoming a barred spiral. . . .

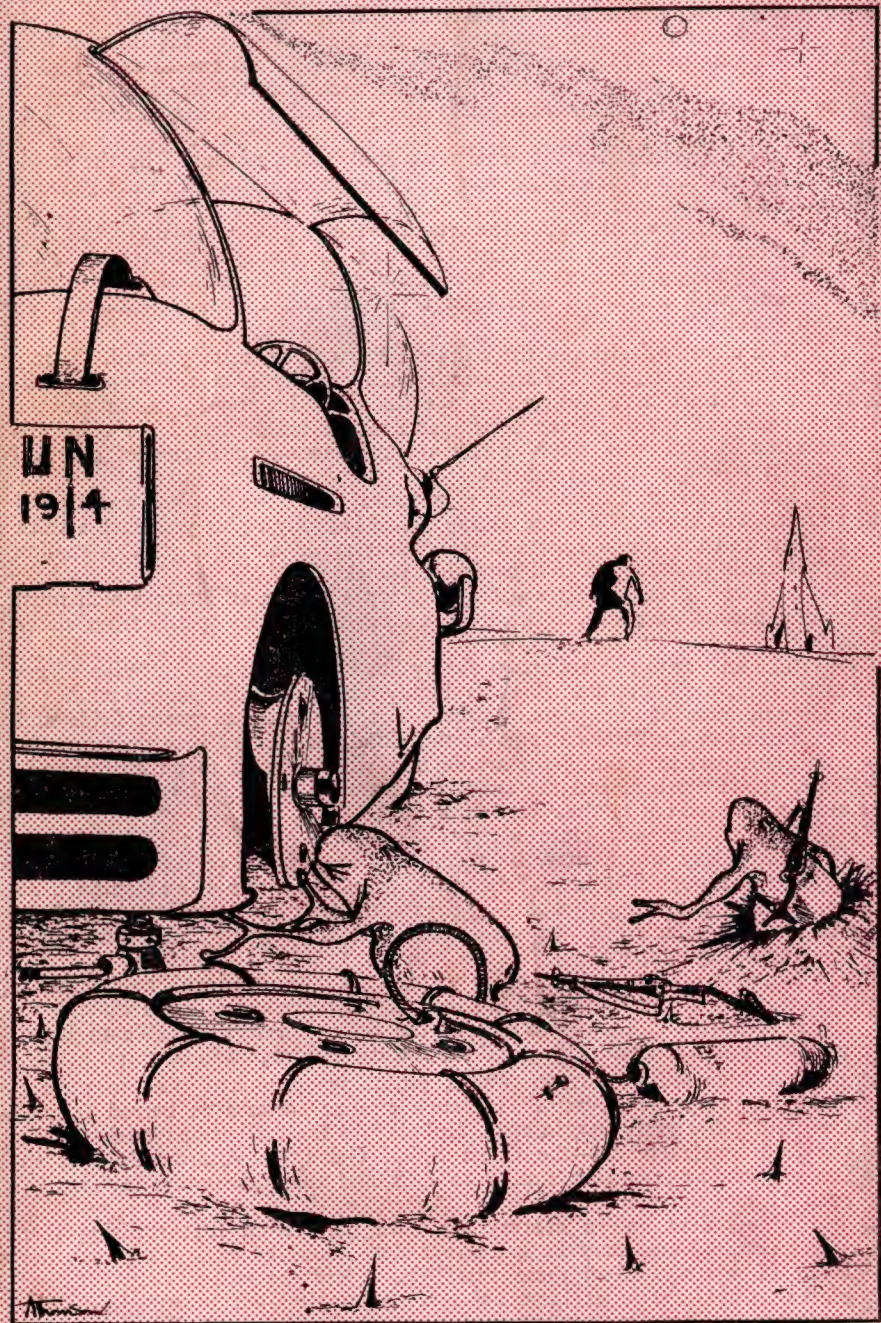
And—a staggering thought—bridges and bars of stars are known which connect two galaxies. Once again this effect is probably due to magnetic fields meshing in space.

But—we don't really yet know why. It is difficult enough to determine the structure of the Earth, and we live on the planet; it is more difficult to try to comprehend the mechanics of the Sun; almost impossible to build up a composite mental image of all the intricacies of our normal spiral galaxy.

Yet Man still reaches outwards, plumbing space and time to ponder and then grasp the "reason" for such strange systems as barred spirals. Only thirty-five years ago, in 1924, Hubble was the first person to show that the Andromeda Nebula—the Great Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda—was in fact a galactic aggregation similar to ours and that there were millions of such "island universes".

In less than half a century we have gone from first realising that galaxies floated discreetly in space to a determined effort to peel away the layers of mystery. And these vast systems are themselves only building blocks in a Universe as large as it is meaningless—or meaningful. The answer to that question we may never know; but that we shall go on trying is written large in the stars.





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